

WRITING THE HEROES  
LEARNED FROM THE  
FOREMOTHERS:  
ORAL TRADITION AND  
MYTHOLOGY IN  
MARIA CAMPBELL'S  
*HALF-BREED*,  
MAXINE HONG KINGSTON'S  
*THE WOMAN WARRIOR*  
&  
EAVAN BOLAND'S  
*OBJECT LESSONS*

A Thesis submitted to the College  
of Graduate Studies and Research  
in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of Master of Arts  
in the Department of English  
University of Saskatchewan  
Saskatoon

By

Jeanie Wills  
Fall 2000

## PERMISSION TO USE

In presenting this thesis in partial fulfilment of the requirements for a Postgraduate degree from the University of Saskatchewan, I agree that the Libraries of this University may make it freely available for inspection. I further agree that permission for copying of this thesis in any manner, in whole or in part, for scholarly purposes may be granted by the professor who supervised my thesis work, or in his absence, by the Head of the Department or the Dean of the College in which my thesis work was done. It is understood that any copying or publication or use of this thesis or parts thereof for financial gain shall not be allowed without my written permission. It is also understood that due recognition shall be given to me and to the University of Saskatchewan in any scholarly use which may be made of any material in my thesis.

Requests for permission to copy or to make other use of material in this thesis in whole or in part should be addressed to:

Head of the Department of English  
University of Saskatchewan  
Saskatoon, Saskatchewan  
S7N 5A5

## Abstract

The following study compares and contrasts the ways three women writers craft narrative selves in their autobiographical texts. Each of the women, the Métis author Maria Campbell, the Chinese-American writer Maxine Hong Kingston, and the Irish lyric poet Eavan Boland, calls on oral techniques to write her autobiography. The study examines how each of the women draws on the oral traditions of her mother-culture, subsequently using characters from culturally distinct mythologies to express her own growth as writer. The methodologies that inform this study are a combination of postcolonial theories about identity and language, and closely related feminist theories about power relations between women and colonialism and women and patriarchal power. Structuralist and feminist theories about mythologies, as well as analysis of the psychodynamics of orality have also influenced the analysis undertaken in this thesis.

The research conducted provides evidence that each woman writes a narrative self structured on the framework of the heroic, but infused with culture-specific heroic characters and characteristics from the mother-culture's oral traditions. Maria Campbell's *Half-Breed* shows distinctly oral influences both in its narrative structure and in its characters. For example, by comparing Maria's character to Wesakaychak's character from Nêhiyawak Trickster cycles and other Native North American Trickster cycles, the study shows how Campbell's character resembles the character from oral tales. The Trickster, and consequently, Maria, destabilizes boundaries and unsettles domains of knowledge, therefore, questioning colonial and patriarchal discourses and imagery. In *Woman Warrior*, Maxine Hong Kingston likewise battles limiting stereotypes held by both her Chinese-American community and the mainstream

community she inhabits. The character Maxine imagines herself as both woman warrior and a warrior poet, characters she hears about from her mother, and in the process of chronicling her own training as a woman warrior, she also chronicles her training as a word warrior. Eavan Boland, in *Object Lessons* unsettles the conventions surrounding the hero-bard whose shadow falls over Irish lyric poetry. While she is marginalized in different ways than either Campbell or Kingston, she shares their desire to show women as active agents in their own lives. These writers show that foremothers exist in other storytelling traditions, even if the textual record does not reflect the influence that female storytellers have had on it. As the women (re)construct themselves in their autobiographies, they work within and against conventional Western heroics, building characters who enrich and redefine what it means to be heroic.

### Acknowledgments

I gratefully acknowledge the guidance and support of my thesis supervisor, Ron Cooley, without whose help I would still and forever be in the rough draft stage. Your critical suggestions, encouragement, and advice made this thesis possible. Thank you Ron. Janice Acoose, sister graduate student, teacher, and friend has also provided support and expended energy in reading my thesis, offering comments and suggestions, and engaging in lively discussions. Meegwich, Janice. I would especially like to acknowledge and thank Maria Campbell, whose story telling first motivated my interest in orality and mythology, and whose autobiography seeded this thesis. Maria has not only generously spent time in discussion with me, but has also offered excellent advice, warm encouragement, and gentle instruction. Thank you Maria; you are an inspiration. I also thank Dr. A.J. Harding for inviting Ms. Campbell to his mythology class. Additionally, for their comments and discussion, I thank my thesis committee. Specialist reader Dr. Hilary Clark's extensive notes, close reading and scrupulous attention to detail have helped immensely. I am also grateful to Dr. Ron Marken who encouraged my interest in oral traditions in his Irish Literature class, and whose comments on this thesis have offered me new insights into Indigenous and Irish literature. I thank my external examiner, Dr. Pamela Downe, whose gracious questions allowed me to talk about my material comfortably. My committee's insights and questions have helped me understand my project in new ways. I am privileged to have such careful commentary.

Finally, I am grateful to the Department of English and the College of Graduate studies for their professional and financial support. Their funding, through scholarships, Graduate Teaching Fellowships, and Writing Centre employment, not only made graduate studies possible, but also has given me invaluable and practical experience in the writing centre and the classroom.

To my friend, partner, lover, and husband John who never doubted.

Thank you.

## Table of Contents

PERMISSION TO USE.....	i
ABSTRACT.....	ii
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.....	iv
DEDICATION.....	v
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	vi
1. THE USE OF ORALITY IN THREE WOMEN'S AUTOBIOGRAPHIES....	1
1.1. ORALITY & AUTOBIOGRAPHY: WRITING THE HEROIC.....	1
1.2. ORALITY AS DECOLONIZATION.....	7
1.3. MYTHOLOGY AS DECOLONIZATION.....	11
1.4. HEROIC AS DECOLONIZATION.....	15
2. THE TRICKSTER CHARACTER IN <i>HALF-BREED</i> .....	19
3. THE WORD WARRIOR IN <i>WOMAN WARRIOR</i> .....	38
4. THE HERO-BARD IN <i>OBJECT LESSONS</i> .....	58
5. CONCLUSION... ..	78
WORKS CITED.....	83

# **Chapter One**

## **The Use of Orality in Three Women's Autobiographies**

### **1.1 Orality & Autobiography: Writing the Heroic**

While it is impossible to “write” an oral tradition, it is possible to write from oral tradition, translating oral form and content such as mythological archetypes to text. Although an author cannot precisely capture the story-teller’s tone of voice or other physical expressions, or the quality of the story’s silences, she can make use of both conventions and practices of oral story telling, and the characters and events from oral stories. Maria Campbell’s *Half-Breed*, Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts*, and Eavan Boland’s *Object Lessons: The Life of the Woman and the Poet in Our Time* illustrate some of the roles oral art forms play in autobiographical writing.

Campbell, Kingston, and Boland use a heroic quest pattern to reclaim the heroic from a Western world where the hero is predominantly masculine. Although historically patriarchal discourse has commonly paired the masculine and the heroic, these women authors use the quest pattern to write autobiographically, demonstrating that the pattern does not belong exclusively to male characters. In reclaiming the heroic from Western patriarchal discourse, the women are working with English literary conventions from their dominant cultures. For example, Elleke Boehmer asserts “the majority of narratives of empire involved masculine heroes” (9), and explains that “travellers and colonizers transferred familiar metaphors, which are themselves bridging devices, to [new] contexts” (14). Unlike the old heroes of empire, Campbell, Kingston, and Boland emphasize the role gender plays in their lives as they transfer metaphors that are familiar to the dominant culture (the hero &



quest) to new contexts (racialized women). By translating their own familiar cultural oral conventions to text, they bridge the gap between their marginalized oral cultures and the dominant textual cultures. In the process, they transform the familiar literary questing hero by infusing and enriching the image with their own gender and culture-specific perspectives, and they transform the heroic from their oral cultures by writing it down.

Campbell, Kingston, and Boland construct selves within a framework of the heroic by honouring oral traditions learned from foremothers, resisting the colonizing forces of the dominant cultures that each inhabits. Each author creates what Bruce King describes as a “usable past or a cultural tradition” (1115), as a context for her own artistic growth and development. In some ways, these women’s writings are comparable to the “new literatures” that accompany “nationalist movements,” in that their autobiographies present “representative subject-matter, local language usage, local history . . . and demands for social justice.” Additionally, the texts recognize a “national mythology . . . [document] local ways,” and reject “middle-class colonial values” (King 1115).

For example, Campbell’s narrator speaks representatively for “Half-breed” women, asserting in the Introduction that she writes to “tell you” what “it is like to be a half-breed woman in our country” (2), and thereby articulating her life as distinct from lives lived in the dominant culture. In the process of “telling” her life, she documents language use in her “Road Allowance” community, and offers local history. Moreover, the narrator criticizes Canada’s social fabric, while drawing on the stories from her “Road Allowance” community to reveal the intricately woven lives of its members.

Like Campbell’s narrator, Kingston’s also strives to articulate a life distinct from “ordinary” ones in the dominant culture, and from those of other Chinese immigrant offspring. While Campbell addresses a “you” from the dominant culture, Maxine talks to a Chinese-American “you” in explicit critique of her own culture: “Chinese-Americans, when you try to understand what things in you are Chinese, how do you separate what is peculiar to childhood, to poverty, insanities, one family,

your mother who marked your growing with stories, from what is Chinese? What is Chinese tradition and what is the movies?" (5-6). Kingston's narrator describes the particular Chinese language she speaks, and uses the term "talk-story" to label her mother's narratives. She provides a history of the local immigrant community in Stockton, while she reinvents Chinese language talk-story characters as avengers of the dominant culture's racism and her own community's sexism.

Like Campbell and Kingston's narrators, Boland's documents her distinct Irish language use, and provides a history of Dublin's Clonmel suburb where she lives. Boland's narrator, however, differs from Kingston's and Campbell's. To clarify Boland's relationship to the others, I will often devote more space to her situation. For example, Boland does not reject all "middle-class colonial values" (King 1115); in fact, she glorifies suburbia which epitomizes middle-class values. Furthermore, Boland's oral legacy comes not just from female relations, but includes oral forms transmitted between Irish women. However, Boland *does* reject the gender values that Irish poets in a national tradition have perpetuated. Eavan Boland explicitly resists the images of Irish poets and lyric poetry: "poetic convention. . . whispered to me that the daily things I did, things which seemed to me important and human, were not fit material for poetry. . . they were not sanctioned by poetic tradition. But . . . they could become so. If I wished to integrate these devalued areas into my poetry, I had only to change them slightly" (252). Boland rejects static and passive images of women in the national Irish lyric tradition. Instead, she strives to represent women's lives in a more complex manner. Boland's narrator wants to show the menial, "the unglamorous, workaday, authentic," to take "truth and [reveal] its beauty" (253).

The women, scrutinizing their relationships to the discourses of the mainstream societies, use orality in their texts "to resist colonial perspectives" and to "take their place as historical subjects" (Boehmer 3). Rather than allowing the dominant culture the power to name her and so limit her, each woman writes a self to oppose images constructed for her, and labels attached to her, and each woman locates herself in a particular historical context and a particular oral culture. The

narrator each author creates interprets her own history, and her family's history.<sup>1</sup> The narrators, by recalling stages of their lives, show how their histories differ from their representations in the discourses of the dominant communities. Because each author carefully identifies her oral community, she emphasizes and honours the source of her voice, the setting that initiates the artist's development, where love of and skill in language and narrative are nourished matrilineally.

Each author claims a unique mother-tongue, different from the English of the dominant culture, and distinctive even among marginal languages. For example, Maria Campbell's narrator speaks a language different from the Nêhiyawak (Cree), French, and English and blends of the three that others around her speak. Maxine Hong Kingston's narrator explains that her unique mother tongue stops her from "checking bilingual on job applications" (205) because no-one understands her Chinese language; she comments that "[n]o other Chinese, neither the ones in Sacramento, nor the ones in San Francisco, nor Hawaii speak like us" (186). Boland's linguistic context differs from Campbell's and Kingston's. For example, although Boland's mother-tongue is English, it is neither Irish-English nor Standard English. The narrators childhood memories in England include recalling the "humiliation" of having her tongue "betray" her out of her dream of being an English "Alice without the looking glass" (40). When she says "I amn't," a distinctly Irish construction, the teacher sternly reminds her that she is "not in Ireland now" (46). She moves from England to the United States, returning to Ireland as a teen-ager, however, with "no knowledge of the Irish language" (73). She has not had "an Irish childhood" (79), so her life in Ireland, like her life in England, lacks "an idiom" (77), and the narrator fears she will never "find a language" (111). Boland's narrator seeks to uncover the "hidden language" that will illuminate her hidden [woman's] life (119). Language has marked each narrator as different. Each author shows how her mother-tongue has marginalized her, yet paradoxically, strengthened the narrative voice.

---

<sup>1</sup> Susanna Egan argues that it is crucial to distinguish between the narrator and the author, writing that metaphor allows autobiographers to create virtual lives: "[m]etaphor conceals and reveals the original, the model, by creating a comparison that works, a likeness, a virtual character" (19).

Campbell, Kingston and Boland speak out and speak back to racist and sexist discourses that have attempted to map the terrain of their lives. Racist and sexist discourse find their authority, in part, through colonial discourse, and the imposition of Standard English. Peter Hulme defines colonial discourse as “an ensemble of linguistically-based practices unified by their common deployment in the management of colonial relationships, an ensemble that could combine the most formulaic and bureaucratic of official documents. . . with the most non-functional and unprepossessing of romantic novels” (2). Colonial discourse provides a model for mainstream discourse, which (re)produces the lives of “Others.” These women’s memoirs rename and reclaim the territory of their lives. Each of these women uses her memoir as a form of “revenge” against the colonizing or oppressing community on whose margin her mother-cultures exist.<sup>2</sup> Each narrator contests the way English has named her: “half-breed,” “gook,” and “poetess.” Each illustrates how community and language construct identity. Each narrator’s growth is also a journey, which takes place in language. In the process of exploring the impact of both mother-tongue and English on their identities, the narrators refute stereotypes and redefine labels.

What mainstream discourse has named disadvantage, or even disgrace, the women authors reinterpret as advantage. For example, Maria Campbell names both the narrator and her book “Half-breed,” embracing and so claiming power over a term that the dominant culture has used pejoratively. Campbell asserts an active, independent self, thereby subverting racist assumptions of passivity held by the mainstream, and fostered in the “Road Allowance” community by association between themselves and the mainstream. When she leaves home, Campbell gains the distance necessary to write about her own culture. Thus, Campbell engages in what Elleke Boehmer refers to as “self-making” (196), showing an interplay of identity between Nêhiyawak (Cree), Métis, and Scottish-Canadian cultures, even as she claims a “Half-Breed” identity. Because she describes how her oral community comes into being, she participates in what Boehmer calls “self-imagining” (197) and

---

<sup>2</sup> Leigh Gilmore calls “[s]elf-representation and confession . . . acts of revenge sometimes visited upon an oppressive, punitive, or coercive community” (173).

so shows the “Half-Breeds” as “subjects of their own history: fighting amongst themselves, plotting, making mistakes, failing or succeeding” (195). In addition to showing the “Road Allowance” people as active participants in their country’s history, Campbell’s narrator claims responsibility for her life, rather than status of victim of an unjust society. The narrator claims agency, overturning racist and sexist assumptions of the passivity of “Other.” Campbell’s title is confrontational and she uses it to stake out a claim of identity, appropriating a label meant to limit her.

Maxine Hong Kingston’s title claims power over, and suggests defiance of, the images that have influenced the narrator’s self-perception. *The Woman Warrior* openly defies images of passive, frail, and even nurturing women. Kingston writes a narrator who opposes both the sexist assumptions of her Chinese-American family and community, and the racist assumptions of the mainstream American community. In Kingston’s Chinese-American community girls are called “pig” and “stink-pig” (204), and hateful aphorisms include: “Girls are maggots in the rice,” and “It is more profitable to raise geese than girls” (43). The dominant culture names the narrator with words such as “chink” and “gook,” and she feels pressure to conform to what she describes as “American feminine” (47). The woman warrior is forged out of, and in opposition to, images of women reflected in her Chinese-American community, and in the wider mainstream American community.

In *Object Lessons* Eavan Boland’s narrator creates an identity out of, and in opposition to, the convergence of Irish lyric poetry’s images of women, and Irish culture’s images of national poets.<sup>3</sup> She turns what has been a “poetic” disadvantage into advantage, claiming childrearing and suburbia as appropriate subjects for poetry, and poetry as a woman’s occupation. Furthermore, the narrator chronicles how she comes to claim a poet’s identity without sacrificing her gender, claiming power over an Irish icon, the bard, and writing the narrator in defiance of stereotypes of suburbia. To contemporary society, Boland argues, “[a] woman’s life -- its sexuality, its ritual,

---

<sup>3</sup> I am not attempting to suggest that Irish culture is monolithic; I am, however, attempting to suggest that Boland is writing back to a specific cultural phenomenon: the Gaelic Literary Revival of the 1890’s in which Yeats and Lady Gregory were involved. For an in-depth look at the cultural revival, see John Hutchinson’s *The Dynamics of Cultural Nationalism*.

its history -- has become a brilliantly lit motif, influencing the agenda of culture and commerce alike" (x-xi). Boland says this status shift between a poet's life and a woman's life is contemporary, a change from the time when the "poet's life," was considered extraordinary, and a "woman's life was not honored" (x). Boland defines her narrator by vocation and female gender, claiming to have found her poetic voice "by shouting across that distance" (xi) between the lives of poet and woman, by writing about the "contradiction between the way [she] made an assonance to fit a line and the way [she] lifted up a child at night" (xi). Making domesticity part of the poetic, Boland elevates the domestic to the realm of the mythic and the heroic and she "rescues" silenced voices from the past. This process of "historical retrieval, including the reclamation of oral memory," allows the "damaged selves" of women and of poets to be "remade" (Boehmer 194). Boland's memoir complements the post-colonial writings of Kingston and Campbell because, as Boland argues "[Ireland] is not the only country or the only politic where the previously passive objects of a work of art have, in a relatively short time, become the authors of it" (127).

### **1.2 Orality as Decolonization**

Each author uses oral traditions from her home community to ground her text and to amplify her voice. Maria Campbell's *Half Breed*, Maxine Hong Kingston's *Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts*, and Eavan Boland's *Object Lessons: The Life of the Woman and the Poet in Our Time* each reflect the communities that the authors identify as prime influences on their narrators. Maria Campbell identifies her narrator's oral communities as the "Half-Breed" community of the "Road Allowance" people in Northern Saskatchewan and the Nêhiyawak (Cree) community of her extended family at the Sandy Lake reserve. The narrator claims her great grandmother, Cheechum, as her primary story-telling influence. Maxine Hong Kingston's narrator inherits her oral community from her China-born mother, and Stockton California's Chinese-American community, and learns the oral art of "talk-story" from her mother. Eavan Boland's community is more diffuse: her narrator explores "femaleness" as a community in Irish poetry.

While none of these authors comes from a primary oral culture, each does expressly refer to oral narratives learned in domestic settings. Walter Ong defines primary oral cultures as those “untouched by writing in any form,” and he defines oral tradition as a way of absorbing cultural information: “Human beings in primary oral cultures . . . learn by apprenticeship . . . by discipleship, which is a kind of apprenticeship, by listening, by repeating what they hear, by mastering proverbs and ways of combining and recombining them, by assimilating other formulary materials, by participation in a kind of corporate retrospection” (9). Ong acknowledges that in today’s world “primary oral culture in the strict sense hardly exists, since every culture knows of writing and has some experience of its effects”; however, he points out that “to varying degrees many cultures and subcultures, even in a high-technology ambiance, preserve much of the mind-set of primary orality” (11). Maria Campbell’s “Road Allowance” community, while aware of literacy, also maintains oral practices in education and story telling. Kingston’s mother is not illiterate; moreover, Chinese writing is one of the oldest writing systems in the world. However, Mother Hong’s educational institute provides oral medical training, and “medicine chants” are part of the curriculum. Eavan Boland’s community of lyric poets, historical and contemporary, are of course literates, and “oral tradition” in Ireland has been a prized cultural production. However, Boland imagines an oral tradition practiced by women, that speaks to their private experiences.<sup>4</sup> She tries to collapse the split between objective/public space represented in lyric poetry and the subjective/private space of women’s orality, showing how the public constrains the private. For all three, using orality assists in decolonizing the self and claiming artistic space in a society that has subordinated oral art forms to written productions.<sup>5</sup> Walter Ong argues, “[t]exts have

---

<sup>4</sup> Boland describes oral tradition in a poem called “Oral Tradition.” The poem’s speaker stands “half-wondering / what becomes of words, / the brisk herbs of language, / the fragrances we think we sing,” (lines 5-8) when she overhears two women discussing a third woman giving birth in an “open meadow” (48); The speaker calls their “talk” a “gesture, / an outstretched hand” (24-25) and she hears “words like ‘summer,’ / ‘birth,’ ‘great-grandmother’” which keep “pleading” with her, “urging” her to follow (30). The speaker finds herself “caught by it,” and describes the “oral song/ avid as superstition, / layered like an amber in/ the wreck of language/ and the remnants of a nation” (70-75).

<sup>5</sup> In a 1980 interview, Kingston says that her style, which mimics “talk-story,” is her way of claiming “America in a literary way,” a statement that reveals a decolonizing impulse (16).

clamored for attention so peremptorily that oral creations have tended to be regarded generally as variants of written productions or, if not this, as beneath serious scholarly attention" (8). However, each of the women considered here draws on the oral traditions of her home community to support the construction of a textual self, and to assert the dignity of oral art.

The three authors draw both form and content from their respective oral traditions. According to Ong, oral tradition can be described as "a heritage of oral performance, genres and styles" (12). Each author uses oral performance techniques such as backtracking, circularity, loose chronological order, episodic structure. Each author uses the genre of genealogy. Each author uses oral matter, such as family history. For example, in Chapter 1, Campbell's narrator offers a broad historical overview of the Métis from 1860 to 1885. She then focuses the history on her community, "my people" (7), in Chapter 1, reserving the account of her own birth until Chapter 3. Campbell's narrative moves from present to past in the Introduction, and uses the genres of history and genealogy to introduce community and family history in Chapter 1. *Half-Breed* has a loose chronological order, but some incidents blend time rather than sequence it: Christmas memories circle into one another, and childhood memories are a series of episodic structures marked by dramatic events, such as the death of Maria's mother, Maria's marriage to Darrel, and the loss of her siblings. Walter Ong writes, "a narrator in oral culture . . . normally and naturally operated in episodic patterning" (148). This patterning in Campbell's narrative gives it a cyclic quality because the episodes are complete unto themselves.

Oral histories of family and community also support and structure Kingston's text. *The Woman Warrior* is episodic, anecdotal, and like oral epics, digressive. Even as the narrator describes Mother Hong's episodic woman warrior tale, Kingston presents her narrative in episodic structures which may be read as discrete units rather than as chapters in a continuous narrative. The narrator offers family history and an abbreviated community history, describing first her father's aunt in "No Name Woman," then her mother in "Shaman," and her mother's sister in "At the Western Palace." Through oral histories of family, Maxine shows herself not as a rugged



individualist, but as a Chinese-American woman whose life is an outgrowth of her mother's life, her aunt's life, her foremother's lives.

Boland too relies on characteristics that are common to oral performances. Repetition and back-tracking allow her narrator to return "to the moment of the poem," time and again. She self-consciously returns to the "same tablecloth . . . the identical table. . . [t]he same October day" (xiii). Boland describes this method of constructing the memoir as a series of "turnings and returnings" (xiii). This method conveys "the variability and fluidity of text" in oral performance wherein the performance can never be the same because "the text" is never the same, only "essentially the same" (Lord 863-64). Oral traditions also make use of repetition of key images and themes as does Boland. Each return to the same moment offers a different reading of that moment and as such, Boland's turnings and returnings mimic the non-repeatability of performance.

The women's use of oral techniques within their texts allows their memoirs to act as instruments of decolonization, while underscoring the tensions between the narrators and their communities. Each woman privileges her own community and its ways of knowing and telling, rather than imposed colonial ways. The narrators draw on features of orality to talk back to the stereotypes of the dominant culture and to demonstrate how language creates reality. The autobiographies show speech as action and as having the ability to do what it says it will. For example, a division of oral traditional ritual poetry is magic incantations where "the exact reproduction of a text is necessary to make the magic effective" (Lord 863). The women use their memoirs as a form of magic incantation. They write of their authorial success and in the process of describing it, they create the reality of the memoirs. The narrators' journeys culminate in the authors' published memoirs, in English, so the texts enact what they describe.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, the authors recreate the ideology of oral people to whom "language is a mode of action and not simply a countersign of thought . . . and

---

<sup>6</sup> Speech act theory as developed by J.L. Austin and John Searle and applied to culture-specific oral traditions and oral discourses would likely yield interesting results. However, an in-depth application of these theories is beyond the scope of this thesis.

... is clearly tied in, at least unconsciously, with their sense of the word as necessarily spoken, sounded, and hence power-driven" (Ong 32).

Each narrator uses the heroic to decolonize and reconstruct herself. Writing the narrators and the memoirs with allusion to heroic archetypes from their own particular oral cultures, the authors not only embrace the differences they have learned from their marginalized communities, but also they restore the communities as ones of relevance to the mainstream. The heroic archetypes reflect the founding mythologies of the women's mother-cultures, and restore these cultures to a place of historic consequence. The women are reconstituting notions of their home cultures. Elleke Boehmer describes "restorative history" as "reconstituting from the position of ... historical, racial, or metaphysical difference a cultural identity which [has] been damaged by the colonial experience" (186). The narrators seek to introduce readers to the "roots, origins, founding myths and ancestors, national fore-mothers and - fathers" (Boehmer 186) of their communities and artistic legacies.

### 1.2.1 Mythology as Decolonization

Campbell, Kingston, and Boland draw on the mythologies of their home communities, reinforcing the narrators' connections with the heroic. These allusions are often quite subtle, such as Maria Campbell's allusion to a character from the mythological cycles of the Nêhiyawak (Plains Cree) when, in the Introduction, she says that perhaps, when she is a grannie, she will write more (2). With this simple allusion to "grandmothers," she offers an invocation to the sacred forces of her community's mythologies in which grandmothers are archetypal ancestral spirits. In addition to acting as a muse or artistic guide, Cheechum, or the grandmother spirit is the narrator's "guide" during Campbell's narrator's figurative descent into the underworld when she recovers from heroin addiction. Indeed, the text *Half-Breed* is filled with allusions to Nêhiyawak and Métis legends and stories. For example, Campbell's narrator's nickname, "Owl," represents a messenger figure.<sup>7</sup> That her

---

<sup>7</sup> This information comes from Jean Desjarlais, a Métis who calls himself "Oohosis" or "owl" "because the owl is a messenger" (Erdoes *American Indian Myths and Legends* 191). In addition, Sarah Whitecalf describes owl as a messenger in her 1990 La Ronge lectures (Wolfart 39).

people call her “Owl” reflects the narrator’s function to tell not only the dominant culture, but also Status Indian people, what it is like to be a Métis woman in Canada. The narrator tells stories about a man named “Wolverine,” and about the cannibal spirit Witecoos. Each of these mythic characters has a symbolic resonance within the story. Furthermore, Campbell’s narrator is like a Trickster character and her tale is structurally similar to Trickster’s tales.

In oral mythology and stories from Nêhiyawak, with whose cultures Maria Campbell’s half-breed culture is inextricably intertwined, the figure of the Trickster is a central culture hero who functions to keep knowledge always on shifting ground and represents a complex heroic, which reinforces a sense of community, rather than rugged individualism. Trickster is either male or female, and s/he sometimes teaches not through exemplary behaviour but through misconduct. S/he exemplifies the harmful effects of individuality, but s/he also illustrates the benefits of an individual who always questions society and its status quo. Trickster reinforces continuity through survival and adaptation to a changing culture.

Kingston’s memoir employs mythological images in the chapter titles. The titles, “White Tigers,” “Shaman,” “At the Western Palace,” and the final chapter, “A Song for A Barbarian Reed Pipe,” each allude to legends and characters from China. Additionally, each chapter chronicles a leg of the narrator’s mythological heroic journey which culminates in the final chapter, “A Song.” In this chapter, when she provides an ending for a talk-story her mother begins, Kingston’s narrator has made her conquest. Through the chapter titles, Kingston articulates the stages of the narrator’s journey. Maxine journeys from silence and invisibility in the first chapter, “No Name Woman,” to speech and expression in the final chapter, a “A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe” where Maxine becomes a warrior poet. Kingston reworks mythology, describing her story telling style as one that reinvents both “peasant myths” and the “great heroes from the high tradition” to integrate mythology into the “peasant’s life as well as into the Chinese American’s life” (Kingston Interview, 1980 14).

Kingston's narrator integrates mythology into her own life, composing a heroic self who is constructed out of female heroic characters derived from her mother's Chinese talk-story. The narrator identifies with these heroic warrior characters from her mother's talk story, and is a composite of the historic poet Ts'ai Yen whom Kingston reinvents, and Fa Mu Lan, a warrior character like the warrior woman from Mother Hong's stories.<sup>8</sup> She uses these two characters as bridging devices between her two cultures, privileging her mother's talk-story as the originating source of the Mu Lan warrior stories she retells in "White Tigers." Ts'ai Yen creates a new genre of song, much as Kingston's narrator create a new genre of talk-story. However, Kingston transforms both Ts'ai Yen and woman warrior archetype so they bespeak the narrator's American life.

Eavan Boland, unlike either Campbell or Kingston, relies on the mythology surrounding a cultural figure privileged by the Irish mainstream: the bard. However, Boland is "revisioning" this mythology to include women's experiences within its boundaries. This drive for inclusiveness fuels Boland's preoccupation with family history. Boland's narrator begins a quest for concrete evidence of her grandmother, Mary Ann Shiels, and the lack of evidence brings her to an awareness of her grandmother's missing life. Images of women as mothers and grandmothers are tropes for Ireland in Irish lyric tradition, but for the narrator, this unknown woman deserves a more complex embodiment. The grandmother's unrecorded life symbolizes the narrator's own life as a woman and a poet, a life whose representation

---

<sup>8</sup> Ts'ai Yen is a 2nd Century AD Chinese poet caught between two worlds whose work breaks down distinctions between cultures. Her poem "The Lamentation" tells about the "bizarre and bitter life" of its author (Wang 538). Ts'ai Yen lives between two worlds when she is captured by Tartars, imprisoned and married to a Chieftain with whom she has two children. While she is returned home after twelve years of captivity, the homecoming is ironic and bittersweet, because she abandons her "barbarian" family in anticipation of reuniting with her family of origin, only to find that she has no family to return to: they have not survived the civil war (Wang 36 - 39). The speaker in "The Lamentation" distinguishes between "us Chinese" and "border people," a distinction that is reflected in Maxine's attempts to differentiate between what is Chinese and what is American. Ts'ai Yen may also have written a poem called "Eighteen Beats of the Tartar Whistle" which unites a "civilized" poet with a "barbaric" instrument. Some critics have noted similarities between Ts'ai Yen's work and "The Ballad Of Mulan" (Wang 538) which is cited as being authored anonymously (Liu 80). While Ts'ai Yen's "The Lamentation" breaks down cultural distinctions, "The Ballad of Mu Lan" breaks down gender distinctions.

is unrecorded when the young narrator begins to write poetry. Seeking a tangible sign that will constitute historical evidence of her grandmother's existence, the narrator uses her quest as a springboard to launch a mythology of the formation of a woman poet. In doing so, she claims as feminine the territory of the heroic bard. Even as she claims this model to write the self, she sets about redefining its terms to make them more inclusive. She offers her own life as an archetype -- it includes marriage, motherhood, and suburbia -- and she attributes mythopoeic force to the dailiness of suburban life.<sup>9</sup> Boland's narrator seeks to connect the lives of women and the lives of poets which have been "formidable historical editors" of each other (iv). She attempts to overturn the perception of the poet's life "as arcane and worse: as a code of outdated power systems whose true purpose was to exalt . . . his suitability for election to a category which made him or her exempt from the shared experience of others" (xi). To embark on this task, Boland's narrator has to be more than a half-named poet whose woman's life would be "half in shadow" (29). Boland's narrator must redefine the mythology surrounding the Irish bard so that she can take her place as a woman poet in an Irish national tradition. Whereas the historic Irish bards sang of the feats of kings and warriors and mythologized their patrons, Boland's narrator "sings" of the feats of women and mythologizes the daily and the ordinary.

Boland's narrator fashions herself after the romantic bard hero, an ancient figure in Irish literature and Irish oral tradition, and one that captures the popular imagination during times of political struggle, such as the Irish Literary Revival. She appropriates this image of the Irish bard, privileged and mythologized in the popular imagination, saying it casts its shadow on modern poets. Boland claims that when she began to write "the idea of the poet was honored" (ix), "a poet . . . was sometimes quoted," and the "sayings of poets frequently found their way into a sort of image file

---

<sup>9</sup> In *Stealing the Language*, Alicia Ostriker suggests that where women write strongly as women, it is clear that their intention is to subvert and transform the literature they inherit (211). Furthermore, she asserts that "whenever a poet employs a figure or a story previously accepted and defined by a culture [as Campbell, Boland, and Kingston do], the poet is using myth" (212). Ostriker also suggests that historic and quasi historic figures from folk tales and legends qualify as mythic and that working with myth confers on the writer the sort of authority unavailable to someone who writes 'merely' out of the private self (213).

... which further reinforced the sense of poetry as something in high relief and set apart” (ix-x). Contrasting the woman’s life with the poet’s life, she says “no one I know suggested that it was exemplary in the way a poet’s was” (x). By privileging voices that have been excluded because of their gender (as women, they could neither claim to be poets nor to live exemplary lives) Boland privileges female orality, but she also identifies the textual world of the male poets as linguistic influence.

### **1.2.2 Heroic as Decolonization**

Campbell, Kingston, and Boland recreate the narrators’ apprenticeships in oral story-telling as journeys similar to those undertaken by epic heroes. Heroic conventions bridge their own cultures and their mainstream cultures, so while each author does position her narrator as “different” from mainstream culture, each also shows how mainstream influences her narrator. Modelling the narrator on a heroic structure, each woman speaks back to discourses that have denied racially and economically marginalized women access to the hero’s image, or to a story-telling forum. The authors construct narrators who identify and subvert the expectations of the dominant culture, using the heroic character familiar to the dominant culture but certainly not exclusive to it. These narrators are like explorer heroes from Western narratives whose quests involve conquest. They are also very different, however, because Western epic heroes are exclusively male, (Odysseus, Beowulf, Milton’s Satan, Adam and Christ). Because “control over territory includes command of the imagination” (Boehmer 5), the women authors construct heroic narrators who figuratively rescue “the self,” by embarking upon a journey to reclaim self from mainstream discourse and yet rename self in the mainstream discourse.

The heroes that the women write are supported by an ideological framework that opposes that of Western culture’s heroic. While the Classical (wrath/conquest) and Christian (endurance) heroes are always willing to martyr themselves in conflict, the culture-specific heroes of the women’s memoirs stand for longevity and survival rather than martyrdom or violent revenge. Using epic heroic conventions from their own cultures, Campbell, Kingston, and Boland subvert Classical and Christian notions of the heroic. Classical notions of the heroic link supreme virtue with courage

in battle and a desire for empire, while Christian notions of the heroic prize patience and heroic martyrdom (Revard 368). Both the dominant discourse's stereotypic portrayals, and the rugged individualism of the Western hero are undercut by the women's heroic characters who are dependent on their communities.<sup>10</sup> Elleke Boehmer calls this undercutting necessary: "decolonization [demands] symbolic overhaul, a reshaping of dominant meanings. Postcolonial literature undercuts thematically and formally the discourses that support colonization -- the myths of power, the race classifications, the imagery of subordination" (3). Campbell, Kingston, and Boland's narrators interrogate myths of power, race classifications, and racist and sexist imagery. Subverting the expectations of the dominant culture that labels them as such, the women claim heroic selves who are not helpless, passive, or frail.

Each of the authors writes a narrator who determines that her survival is based on bridging her two worlds and adapting from each. The authors interweave notions of the heroic from their home cultures and from the mainstream. The heroic patterns of Western culture include fairly standard elements. According to David Leeming in *Mythology: The Voyage of the Hero*, heroic narratives tell of the miraculous conception, birth, and hiding of the child. The hero's childhood involves initiation and omens. Leeming offers examples of the hero's preparation, meditation and withdrawal, trial and quest, descent to the underworld, and resurrection and rebirth. Campbell, Kingston, and Boland use these narrative elements to construct heroic patterns for their narrators.

The narrators use elements common to Western culture's heroic, in conjunction with heroic elements from their oral traditions, to decolonize themselves. Like other heroes from Western culture, each of the narrators describes an extraordinary childhood or childhood event that marks the significance of the narrator's life. For example each narrator's childhood is marked by socioeconomic

---

<sup>10</sup> Agnes Grant notes "the rugged individualism of heroes in non-Native North American folklore is antithetical to this sense of community," which is predicated upon First Nations connection to land and place (ix).

marginalization. Campbell and Kingston are marginalized by race, language, status, and the stereotypes the dominant discourses hold of racialized women (those other than Euro-descended Caucasians). On the other hand, Boland's narrator is set apart by a childhood of extraordinary privilege. Each narrator describes some type of initiation which marks her as "special." Campbell's narrator has an instant of second sight when her mother dies. Kingston's narrator believes that her mother has cut her frenum to make her tongue more agile, and while studying Latin, Boland's narrator learns that language is a way to control and compress time. Each narrator undertakes a heroic journey and quest. Campbell's narrator journeys from Saskatchewan to British Columbia and back to Saskatchewan, as she distances herself from her "Half-breed" family in order, paradoxically, to journey closer to her own identity. Kingston's narrator chronicles a fantastic journey and quest wherein old people train her in the ways of a warrior woman, a metaphor for her development as successful talk-story artist. Boland's narrator journeys from Dublin to the suburbs, leaving behind the poet's life she knows from its description in poetry, for a life not named by her craft. This journey begins another journey to the past to recover women's imagery in Irish lyric poetry. The journeys bring the narrator closer to what it means to be a poet. For all three narrators, leaving home on a quest becomes a means of decolonization because each narrator also leaves behind her marginalized culture to reconstruct herself. Each of the narrators undergoes a figurative descent into an underworld. Campbell's narrator's underworld is prostitution and heroin addiction. The woman warrior's underworld is represented by her fear of silence, and Boland's underworld is the Irish lyric tradition's bardic history. The narrators encounter their version of "the dead" who aid in the heroes' ascents and clarify the quest.

Campbell, Kingston, and Boland's memoirs privilege the art and artistry of communities whose cultural productions have been marginalized by the dominant culture. The memoirs resist racist and sexist discourse, and each asserts a critical standard nourished by female relations and developed in particular communities. The writers reformulate the oral traditions of their communities and the heroes carried by



those oral traditions, using the narrators to acknowledge their debts to their story-telling mentors.

## Chapter Two

### The Trickster Character in *Half-Breed*

Maria Campbell's *Half-Breed* constructs textual subjectivity by translating oral narrative strategies to text, a method which undermines English literary conventions through its emphasis on the storytelling arts of her Métis and Nêhiyawak<sup>1</sup> communities, and a method which transforms oral conventions by translating them to paper. Campbell's autobiography creates a textual bridge between her marginalized oral cultures and the dominant textual culture. From listening to stories and legends told by her grandmothers, and by the members of her childhood communities, she learns the oral narrative strategies that she translates to *Half-Breed*. In telling her life's story, she alludes to sacred mythologies and archetypes, recalls legends and tales, and braids themes and patterns from oral story cycles with English literary conventions such as autobiography. The narrator signals her linguistic affiliation with oral storytelling from her Indigenous cultures both through her use of Nêhiyawak and Mitchif terms, and through her allusions to characters prominent in Plains Cree and Métis oral traditions such as the Trickster hero/anti hero and archetypes from mythology such as the Grandmothers. Campbell negotiates a textual self and shows an author in the process of becoming one, by translating Trickster<sup>2</sup> story motifs to autobiography, thus subverting English literary conventions, while transforming the oral narratives that are her storyteller's legacy.

Campbell's storyteller's legacy gives her access to the Trickster figure who appears in a number of oral stories, both sacred and profane. This character's adventures offer Campbell a base from which to negotiate constructions of the

---

<sup>1</sup> Nêhiyawak is the name by which the Plains Cree call themselves in their own language.

<sup>2</sup> Maria Campbell calls this character "Wesakaychak," explaining the label "trickster" as one of convenience, but translating "Wesakaychak" as teacher, or healer (personal conversation, June 1998).

narrator. By using the story patterns in which this character appears, Campbell emphasizes that storytelling in all its forms is a political act, and grounds herself in regional Métis and Nêhiyawak cultures. According to Paula Gunn Allen's *Studies in American Indian Literatures*, Trickster stories reveal at least three distinct types. The first is the Heroic Transformer: monster-slayer, hero, creator of order, who achieves power through action; the second type is the Cunning Transformer, who tries to gain power by outwitting her opponents in gambling or games or through marriage or sexual encounters. The third type is Overreacher, who attempts more than s/he can achieve, and therefore suffers humiliation or injury (50). The Trickster character plays a complex role in many North American Indigenous mythologies and many writers, both critics and authors, invoke Trickster figures in their work.

Critic Kimberly Blaeser explains that Trickster is "neither solely good, nor solely bad; neither completely wise, nor only foolish; sometimes the wily perpetrator of tricks, sometimes the buffoon who falls victim to his own pride; sometimes the tribal benefactor, sometimes the bungler who spoils some aspect of the world for man" (Trickster 51). Dell Hymes offers a further elaboration, writing that Trickster can be comic, irresponsible and unsocialized, as well as domestic, mature, compassionate, and unselfish (109). The Trickster character is a sacred element whom Tomson Highway, in *The Rez Sisters*, describes as "as pivotal and important a figure in the Native world as Christ is in the realm of Christian mythology" (XII). Unlike Christ, however, the Trickster wears many guises and goes by many names; s/he is also known as Coyote, Raven, Spider, Wolverine or Old Man Coyote, Naanabozho, or Nanabush. Gerald Vizenor describes Trickster as an "ironic creator and, in the same instance, the contradiction of creation" (170) and explains that the Trickster character signals possibilities and portends transformation. In fact, Vizenor calls Trickster "the translation of creation" (15). The Trickster story cycles weave the sacred and profane, offering sometimes comic, sometimes tragic stories that encode morals and laws. Trickster can appear to be selfish, greedy, gluttonous and lustful, and frequently her behavior leads to disastrous consequences; Trickster's insatiable curiosity about life drives the character to outrageous behaviour, and links the figure

to the human life world wherein s/he suffers from physical discomforts (such as flatulence), makes catastrophic mistakes (which often result in death), and plays tricks (which often backfire) to manipulate others<sup>3</sup>. However, Trickster also manages to create and transform the world, making it habitable for humans. The Trickster archetype is not just a buffoon, but also a teacher, student, and healer. Campbell's narrator, like Trickster, transforms experiences into teaching stories, while she translates a Trickster/ Transformer character to autobiography. Drawing on motifs and patterns learned through listening to the stories told by her community, wherein the Métis take on Trickster characteristics, Campbell not only structures *Half-Breed*, but also translates a Trickster to text.

By using Trickster motifs and episodic structures familiar to Trickster cycles, Campbell constructs the narrator's identity with the aid of cultural artifacts and practices that subvert the mainstream society's discourse about "Half-breeds." Campbell's autobiographical text challenges European-style history, and in the process, *Half-Breed* tells a creation/origin story of the Métis people in Northern Saskatchewan and of its author. *Half-Breed* explains how the Road Allowance community came into being, so the text plays a didactic role, as do Trickster creation stories which teach how the natural world came to be. As *Half-Breed* chronicles the origin and creation of the "Road Allowance" people, it also teaches Euro-Canadians about Métis culture and history, cautions an Aboriginal audience against accepting the status quo, and warns the Métis against the dangers of internal political division. These themes reflect those of Trickster stories. Blaeser explains that:

rather than re-enforcing established values, the stories often question the status quo (which, incidentally, is one of the functions that modern -day stories about Trickster perform most frequently). The purpose in early tribal culture was . . . frequently political: to warn those holding power against acting powerful instead of acting like the mediators of power, or . . . to warn against false customs and false shamans. ("Trickster" 56)

Like some Trickster stories, Campbell's text warns against "false customs" of the dominant culture and questions the status quo. In showing how mainstream society

---

<sup>3</sup> For a complete characterization of Trickster, see Kim Blaeser's article, "Trickster: A Compendium."

has constructed and imposed identities for Indigenous women, Campbell's narrator's voice becomes a political voice for the Métis nation, a voice that articulates the possibility of political transformation. Similarly the narrator shows the possibility of personal transformation, as she makes a journey from addiction and illness, to freedom and health. Campbell employs Trickster themes and motifs not just for political reasons, but also to structure and shape the narrator.

Among the Trickster themes that Maria Campbell uses to construct the narrator in *Half-Breed* is the theme of survival. As Janice Acoose explains, Maria Campbell's "incredible survival journey . . . is in some ways, reminiscent of that of the Trickster" ("Post Halfbreed" 39). Like Trickster, Campbell's narrator is a survivor. She survives life in a small prejudiced prairie community where she is considered an "Indian." She survives the decline of her Road Allowance community; marriage to, and abandonment by, Darrel; prostitution, and heroin addiction. She creates some of the dangerous situations she becomes involved in, partially from a blindness to consequences, but she survives and rebuilds her life. Similarly, Trickster is blind to consequences -- he loses his eyes while juggling them -- but he manages to survive such self-inflicted trials. Even though Trickster story cycles vary amongst groups, they have similar themes and one of the most significant motifs is the Trickster's survival.<sup>4</sup>

Campbell's story, however, mimics Trickster tales in more than just its survival aspect. Kim Blaeser explains that Trickster is not distinctly "human, animal, or god, but has magical powers, including the ability to change shape at will" and that Trickster is a "marginal figure, a mediator who breaks down hard and fast distinctions" (Trickster 50-51). Likewise, Campbell's narrator is a marginal figure and a mediator who exists in between boundaries. Campbell inhabits the boundaries between "European" and "Indigenous," and "Métis" and "treaty Indian." Her story

---

<sup>4</sup> For one example, of Trickster surviving even death see "The Handicap Race," in Reverend E. Ahenakew's "Cree Trickster Tales" (349). Wesakaychak drowns and washes up on shore; After a period of lying dead, he comes back to life: "He was of restless temperament, however, and this saved his life.' What am I doing here, lying down . . . when I could be walking around and looking for something to eat,' said he to himself" (349). Wesakaychak talks himself back to life by articulating his appetite and desires.

deals thematically with boundary crossing and transformation. The narrator changes "shape" and breaks down distinctions, blurring boundaries by exposing stereotypes and revealing cultural plurality and hybridity.

Like Trickster, who blurs boundaries and destabilizes domains of knowledge, Campbell blurs distinctions between Euro-centred practice and Indigenous practice, eroding cultural boundaries. In a Trickster-like transformations, Campbell's autobiography blends her community's oral conventions with English literary conventions to subvert both practices, so debunking simplistic notions of authenticity. The narrator's identity is fluid and she overturns assertions of fixed identity. Identifying herself with "Native" people, Campbell seems to address a white Euro audience: "Your people have it too, but in those earlier days you at least had dreams, you had a tomorrow" (9). However, when she speaks about differences within Indigenous culture(s), she speaks as "Half-breed." Like the Trickster figure, the narrative voice "shape shifts," showing boundaries and identities to be constructions rather than natural phenomena. For example, she makes distinctions between "treaty Indian" women and "half-breed women" when she says "[t]reaty Indian women don't express their opinions, Halfbreed women do" (26). Then, however, without explicitly saying that "treaty Indian" identity depends on government bureaucracy, she demonstrates, through the characters of her aunt Qua Chich and Qua Chich's husband Big John, that arbitrary boundaries separate "treaty Indians" and "Half-breeds." Campbell writes: "when the treaty-makers came, he [Big John] was counted in[,] and they became treaty Indians of the Sandy Lake Reserve instead of Halfbreeds"(20). Thus, the narrator's contradiction undermines her distinction between "silent" treaty Indian women, and "outspoken" Halfbreed women, and so Trickster-like, she undermines the identity that she seeks to assert. Campbell debunks notions of authenticity, even her own, by showing the arbitrariness of Indigenous identities constructed through the discourse of the mainstream culture.

The traveler motifs from oral Trickster cycles that appear in *Half-Breed* reflect a quest theme in which the narrator searches for her identity. Maria journeys from Saskatchewan to Kristen, Alberta with her new husband Darrel. From Alberta,

they move to Vancouver where the marriage ends. She leaves Vancouver for Calgary and then returns. Once back in Vancouver, she meets "a guy just out of the pen," and goes to Mexico with him, where he abandons her (143). Intending to return to Canada, she begins hitchhiking, but meets "Indians" from Arizona with whom she stays before returning to B.C. From there, she returns to Alberta to work on a ranch (146), and when she loses that job, she returns to Calgary. From Calgary, she moves to Edmonton, and in the final pages of the autobiography, she comes back to Saskatchewan to visit Cheechum. Each travel episode frames a series of anecdotal stories as Campbell's Trickster-like restlessness keeps her travelling, always looking for a better place for herself. *Half-Breed's* traveling motifs imitate many Trickster legends and stories as the character travels through various locales. For example, some of Edward Ahenakew's "Cree Trickster Tales" open with statements such as "Wesakaychak was now leading what was practically the life of a vagabond. He loved to wander about" (331), or, "It was after this that Wesakaychak was sauntering along aimlessly, having no particular destination in view. The whole land was his home and what mattered it where night overtook him?" (332). Another story opens: "Walking along one summer day in a most aimless way, Wesakaychak was bored to death with himself and his surroundings" (347). And yet another story's opening sentence is "Having nothing of any consequence to do, and being always curious about things, Wesakaychak made up his mind to go straight east. He was determined to swerve neither to the right nor the left (349). "Wesakaychak and The Cannibal" opens with "Going along one day, Wesakaychak had the terrible misfortune to meet a cannibal" (352). Like the legends of Wesakaychak, Campbell's episodic story structure allows for a character who is frequently on the move.

Trickster's self-indulgent desires frequently outstrip the character's common sense, and s/he does not consider consequences carefully, a theme that appears in Campbell's text. Trickster stories often chronicle the character's attempts to obtain food using ruses that sometimes backfire comically.<sup>5</sup> The legend of "Wesakaychak's Buffalo" shows how Wesakaychak tricks a buffalo into a race that is fatal for the

---

<sup>5</sup> See Edward Ahenakew's "Cree Trickster Tales," pages 332, 337-8, 350.

buffalo, who becomes dinner for the Trickster. However, Wesakaychak, after dressing the meat, loses the food through his own error:

Wesakaychak made up his mind to have a sleep first before he partook of it. He deputed his own mouth to call him if any animal should come around to steal. It was to yell out when giving the alarm.

No sooner was he asleep than a mouse came and the mouth of course did its duty, waking up Wesakaychak, who saw only the small creature running away. In a little while the mouth again gave the alarm for practically nothing, and this time it was told to keep quiet for the rest of the night.

The Wolverine was the next one that came, and, no alarm being given, he quietly dragged the dead body of the bull to a bush nearby where he was joined by a large number of other hungry beasts. They feasted to their heart's [sic] content and nothing but bones were left when they finally dispersed.

Wesakaychak woke up hungry in the morning. . . .He could not very well blame anybody but himself. (Ahenakew 337-8)

Campbell also hungers, not just for literal nourishment for herself and her younger siblings, but also for the material trappings of the mainstream community. Her dreams are instilled by contact with Euro-Canadians: "My childhood dreams [were] of tooth-brushes and pretty dresses, oranges and apples, and a happy family sitting around the kitchen table talking about their tomorrow" (131). Internalizing the ideals of the dominant community is, writes Janice Acoose, one of the "symptoms of the colonial disease" ("HalfBreed" 149). Maria does not see that her dreams are "symbols of white ideals of success" (134). Impatient to obtain material things because she thinks that poverty alone has caused the despair of her community, and unable to see other choices, she becomes a prostitute. Like Trickster, she does not carefully consider the consequences of her choice even though she claims responsibility for it: "I knew from the moment I picked up the phone and called her [Lil]" (133). Maria confesses: "There was all the opportunity in the world to run away those first few months, but instead I made myself believe that one day I would wake up and there would be all the things in life which were important to me" (133). The narrator recalls her own blindness, but also, her own appetite to partake in the mainstream's way of life, which increases the longer she internalizes its colonizing



force. Her appetite blinds her to the things that really are important to her: her family, and her people. Maria falls into the traps set for her by the mainstream, not fully understanding the consequences of her choices because she has no idea of the toll the life demands.

Like Wesakaychak, Campbell's choices are made both to facilitate her survival and, Trickster-like, to experience the unknown. For example, the narrator recalls that while she did not know the meaning of the word "whore" when she was a girl, she was fascinated by the exotic ambience it conjured. When her father tells her that only whores go to town dances, this explanation further fuels her imagination. Campbell recalls thinking: "I didn't know what a whore was, but whatever it was, it certainly sounded exciting, and I felt that if it was not too wicked for him, then it was good enough for me" (112). For the young Maria, the word "whore" and the church have a commonality: they both nourish her imagination and craving for adventure. Catholic masses are "bearable" for the young Maria only because they remind her of the exotic settings she has read about in fiction (31), and the Anglican church stimulates her imagination even more because it was founded by "fornicators and adulterers," words that speak of adventure to the child who does not know what they mean. Maria's desire for adventure advances her (mis)understandings of the dominant culture. The young Maria longs for a red satin dress and red shoes (66), symbols which foreshadow her role as a prostitute. Red or scarlet in Euro-Canadian culture is symbolically tied to sexuality, and a "scarlet woman" rejects conventional society's sexual mores. When Maria is a teenager, she finally purchases "the red dress [she] had dreamed about for years. . . . [R]ed net taffeta, sprinkled with silver stars [with] a low v-neckline . . . and a tight waist" (101). For Maria, a red dress is the ultimate symbol of feminine beauty. The red dress however, has different connotations for her than for the dominant society.<sup>6</sup> Her desire to experience all the hedonistic pleasures of the Euro-Canadian world makes her blind to the pitfalls that

---

<sup>6</sup> That in some Indigenous societies the colour red symbolizes spirituality was brought to my attention in a personal conversation with Métis /Saultaux/Nêhiyawak teacher Janice Acoose, September, 1999. Further, in Neihardt's *Black Elk Speaks*, Black Elk (an Oglala Sioux) calls red the colour of plenty and of good (28). In none of these cultures does red have an association with "sinful" sex.

new experiences bring with them. Like the mythic Trickster archetype Wesakaychak, Campbell's narrator apprehends new experiences through personal encounter and so teaches through bad example.<sup>7</sup>

Campbell's character also mirrors Trickster impulsiveness. This impulsiveness causes misfortune for both Trickster and Campbell, but like Trickster, she manages to recover from the misfortunes she causes herself. The text chronicles a series of impulsive actions on Maria's part, from pushing her brother down an outdoor toilet hole (33), to phoning Lil and moving to her "house," to using heroin even after a woman she knows dies from a drug overdose (137). When her friend Ray offers her a chance "make some fast money" as a courier delivering packages across the border to people she is forbidden to talk to, she accepts the job heedless of danger (140). Moreover, even after her experiences in Vancouver, and with heroin, she continues to make impulsive decisions. While she wisely decides that a good job will help her stay off drugs and off the streets, she decides to become a hairdresser, reasoning that because hairdressers wear nice clothes they must make a good wage. She finds out she is wrong, but only *after* she struggles to work and to attend school, only to get a job that does not pay her enough to survive. None of Maria's decisions are fatal however, for like Trickster, she is a survivor.

Maria's behavior is perhaps at its most Tricksterish when she recklessly decides to marry Darrel, a stranger to her and her community, and to leave her home. Some stories tell of Trickster's attempts to arrange marriages, and sexual unions which backfire, just as Maria's does.<sup>8</sup> Attempting to arrange a marriage that will achieve financial security, Maria rejects a suitor from within her community because "he had nothing, and we had to find someone who wanted to take over a large family

---

<sup>7</sup> These "bad example" stories teach because they show the consequences of breaking laws or contravening social mores: Trickster teaches by doing things wrong. Trickster's stories reflect the benefits of experiential learning, which according to Vine Deloria is "the traditional Indian way of learning by doing" (12).

<sup>8</sup> For example in some stories, because Trickster lusts after his daughters, he stages his own death and returns as a suitor to marry them. His ruse is always found out and he faces consequences that vary from story to story. In Richard Erdoes and Alfonso Ortiz's *American Indian Trickster Tales* the consequences Coyote faces seem minor. He tries to calm his wife, swearing that "from now on I sleep only with you!" (61), and he loses his daughters who become stars in the sky to escape their "shame."

and [who] could afford to support all of us" (119). The first time she sees Darrel, she gambles on appearances: "I could tell by his expensive clothes and new car that he could afford to keep us" (119). Maria deceives her father, gaining his permission to marry by pretending she is pregnant. In the manner of Overreacher Trickster, Maria strives to become a parent to her seven siblings, but her attempts to use Darrel miscarry. When he reports her to social services, her younger siblings are removed from her care and fostered out, and she fails in her expectations of herself. Rather than supporting the family, Darrel destroys it, and Maria leaves her home to travel with him, ashamed that she has lost the children. When Darrel abandons his family in Vancouver, Maria, like Trickster Transformer, must transform this world into one in which she can survive.

Campbell's narrator is not only Trickster, but also Transformer Creator who makes the world habitable for humans, slaying monsters, recreating animals, giving humans weapons, and oftentimes, songs. Campbell is doubly creative, creating not only a self, but also a (textual) world, interweaving the autobiographical with elements from oral legends and mythology, showing a Métis woman's struggle to create a world within which she can live and write. Campbell's narrator wants to transform the world of the dominant culture to make it habitable for her people, and she initiates this process by becoming an activist, and subsequently, a teacher. By sharing her story, the narrator teaches survival.

The Trickster/Creator archetype functions as a culture hero, like the epic heroic figure who is "usually central to the traditions and belief of its culture" (Newman 361). Campbell's narrator is a symbol of her community, and in turn, of the Métis nation. Maria's interest in politics is seeded and nurtured by Cheechum (a niece of Gabriel Dumont) who has been politically involved since the Riel Rebellion. She tells Maria stories about the origins of the Saskatchewan Métis, the Riel Rebellion, and she urges Campbell to wait for the "right man," not as a matrimonial candidate, but a political one:

Wait my girl. It will come. I've waited for ninety years and listened to many men. I have seen men quit . . . but we have to keep waiting and as each man stands unafraid we have to believe he is the one and

encourage him. You'll feel discouraged . . . but, like me, you'll wait.(76- 77)

Cheechum is an old woman, and she has waited for a long time for the right man to take charge, but has never seen one succeed. Her advice to Campbell contradicts her earlier advice to the girl, when Maria complains about her parents, calling them "no-good Halfbreeds" (50), and Cheechum responds fiercely: "I will beat you each time I hear you talk as you did. If you don't like what you have . . . do something about it yourself" (51). Cheechum's seemingly contradictory advice, to wait for the "right man," and to "do something about it [her]self," echoes into Maria's future when she becomes a political activist. Her father has taught her to be "the best trapper and hunter in Saskatchewan. . . . to set traps, shoot a rifle, and fight like a boy" (16), and his teaching and sharing of these male domains symbolically empower her to *be* "the right man," so Maria assumes characteristics of Trickster whose shape shifting power allows him to shift gender too. The teachings she gets from her father, in combination with Cheechum's, nourish leadership qualities in Maria, and encourage her to rescue not just herself, but also the Métis people, to transform the world rather than to reject her heritage.

Campbell's narrator further resembles Transformer in metaphoric ways. For example, as caretaker of her seven siblings she is like the Transformer who readies the world for humans. The narrator, in her role as activist, attempts to ready "the world" (the dominant society), to make it habitable for her brothers and sisters. The number of her siblings is significant too, echoing the seventh-generation belief wherein "the shamans, who predicted the arrival of the white man, and the near-destruction of the Indian people, also foretold the resurgence of the native people seven lifetimes after Columbus. We are that seventh generation" (Petrone 162).<sup>9</sup>

Campbell makes other links with symbols from oral story cycles when she writes that

---

<sup>9</sup> Tomson Highway explains, in the foreword of Geoffrey York's book *The Dispossessed* that "It's been seven lifetimes since Europeans first arrived on the shores of North America. . . . This generation is fluent in English . . . [and] armed with university degrees and diplomas (vii). In *Lasting Echoes*, Joseph Bruchac writes "[a]lmost every native person I know has heard of this prophecy, but no one can say for sure when it was first spoken or who spoke it. Some say it was first spoken by Tecumseh in the early 1800s. Or by Crazy Horse six decades later. Or by an Anishinabe holy man who lived two generations before the coming of the Europeans. The prophecy might be said to be part of contemporary Pan-Indian oral tradition" (xix).

she is first born of her siblings (15-16), and that the elders in her community called her "owl eyes" (95). Her status as eldest child and her nickname combine to give the narrator's character a mythic frame of reference: according to Paul Radin the Trickster is sometimes known simply as "First Born" (56). Maria's nickname, combined with her dream vision regarding her mother's death, gives her visionary status (77). Moreover, "Owl" is known as a messenger, and Campbell presents herself as a messenger who writes "to tell you what it is like to be a Halfbreed woman" (2).<sup>10</sup> As first born, as messenger, as caretaker of the seventh generation, as a Transformer Trickster, Campbell's narrator has a mythopoeic resonance.

Campbell's recreation of Trickster motifs and characteristics from oral cycles gives a mythic echo to the narrator she constructs. Campbell devotes Chapters One and Two to ancestral history, and opens Chapter Three with an account of her birth in April, "Frog Moon" or Aiyikipsisim in the Plains Cree "Y" dialect. Her birth month is significant because of beliefs about the natural rhythms of storytelling. According to Kim Blaeser, Trickster "stories are a part of a cycle of tales, and, in certain tribes . . . these tales include sacred stores: stories which can only be told at certain times ("Trickster" 49-50).<sup>11</sup> In Maria Campbell's community, these sacred stories could be told through the first snowfall until the frogs began to sing in the spring; the frog song signalled the time for the people to listen to the stories and the voices of their returning (animal) relations who have much to say to make up for their winter of silence.<sup>12</sup> Because Campbell is born in April, and writing an autobiography (telling her story), she is connected to the season of frog song, and her Indigenous cultures demand that all her relations listen to her voice, listen to her story.

---

<sup>10</sup> For details on "owl" as a messenger, see the end note accompanying Métis storyteller Jean Desjarlais's story "Little-Man-With-Hair-All-over" in Richard Erdoes' *American Indian Myths and Legends*, or see Wolfart's *The Cree Language is Our Identity*.

<sup>11</sup> Reverend E. Ahenakew explains that Wesakaychak legends cannot be narrated during the summer time, explaining (rather cryptically) that "if this is done, snakes are liable to crawl in to listen" (353).

<sup>12</sup> Maria Campbell, Native Literature lecture at the University of Saskatchewan, Sept. 1998.

Campbell's text conjures up characters from oral cycles such as the "witecoos" who is "a white monster who eats children at night"(35).<sup>13</sup> Jennifer Brown writes that "[c]ontemporary Manitoba Crees use the term metaphorically to denote insane, aggressive, murderous, or gluttonous individuals" (161). In Campbell's text, the "witecoos" fear can also be read as a metaphor for a fear that is political in nature: fear of a loss of culture. The "white monster" (white-Euro-Canadian society) cannibalizes its own (Métis) children, and in turn, the Métis politically cannibalize each other, allowing government money to divide them. Campbell provides evidence of this "cannibalism" when she describes the political situation her father becomes involved in, and when she describes how she was lured away from unifying action by government money: "I look back on this experience now with bitterness. Marie and I had been manipulated and divided just as my father and those leaders from my childhood had been" (180). So when Brown writes "[i]t is thought that a person who 'goes windigo' [witecoos] initially retains a conventional appearance, but ultimately loses human identity and cultural knowledge" (159), her description is also a metaphor for the colonization of Indigenous peoples. Campbell's articulation of her own colonization allows her to resist colonization and a subsequent loss of culture as she constructs a narrator, characters, and patterns from Métis-Nêhiyawak legends and mythology.

In her introduction, Campbell associates the narrator with the belief systems of her Indigenous communities, thereby gaining cultural authority. For example, most Indigenous communities have stories that intertwine the people with the land, each evolving out of the other. Campbell compares herself to the land, writing "[l]ike me the land had changed" (2). According to Métis-Nêhiyawak cosmology, the territory of the earth and the things upon it are the domain of the sacred Grandmothers, while the sacred Grandfathers "own" the sky and things in it.<sup>14</sup> Campbell's connection to the land links her symbolically to the sacred Grandmothers,

---

<sup>13</sup> "Witecoose" is a cannibal being that can transform other humans into cannibals; this creature "expresses the danger of living in the subarctic wilderness as well as taboos against cannibalism" according to Gill (345).

<sup>14</sup> Native Literature lecture by Maria Campbell, University of Saskatchewan, September, 1998.

so when she writes that "perhaps someday, when I too am a Granny, I will write more" (2), she invokes a blessing from these keepers of the land for her writing project, much as classical poets invoke the muse to bless their poetic efforts. Campbell alludes to the sacred Grandmothers by using the English word "granny" and invokes them throughout the text each time she names Cheechum.

Cheechum is associated with the spirit world not only because she is a Grandmother, but also because of her second sight, which gives her a visionary status. For example, while digging eyes out of potatoes she has a vision of a death in the family (19), as if the relationship between tuberous plant and earth allowed the potato's eyes to witness Malcolm's death on the path and transfer the vision to her. That Cheechum somehow receives a vision while cutting eyes out of potatoes suggests a playful affiliation with a Trickster story motif described as the "substitution of eyes";<sup>15</sup> the Trickster "exchanges eyes with another animal in order to accomplish a particular feat" (Gill 84). Another instance of vision occurs when Maria describes her arising "late at night" to tell Campbell's father about a fatally ill aunt (19). Furthermore, although Cheechum is not physically present when Campbell goes through her second experience of drug withdrawal, she does act as Maria's spirit guide: "this time my Cheechum was with me the whole time. I could feel her presence in the room and I wasn't afraid" (144). Cheechum, connected to the dream/spirit world but teaching Maria in the real world too, represents the Sacred Grandmothers of mythology, and her character shows the interconnection of the spirit world and this world and their influence on each other.

Campbell further privileges the sacred from mythology in the character of her paternal great aunt, Qua Chich, a "strange old lady" who dresses perpetually in black, observing widows weeds for half a century (20). Like Cheechum, Qua Chich is an elder, a woman of same generation as Cheechum, and so linked with the Sacred Grandmothers of Nêhiyawak and Métis mythology. Campbell's tales of Qua Chich show the woman to be resourceful; she provides money for her relatives but insists upon formal agreements; she helps her "poor relations" (20) by offering them the

---

<sup>15</sup> For an example of this motif see Edward Ahenakew's "Cree Trickster Tales," 347.

services of her horse team for ploughing. The character is a subversive one because she makes the colonizers' methods of survival work for her; she has adapted to the Euro-Canadian world. In fact, she is a success who symbolizes both agricultural and economic abundance.

Using Cree and Mitchif in the text to resist the totalizing authority of English, Campbell refers to her great grandmother with a Mitchif word, "Cheechum". According to Acoose, "Campbell's language, which repeatedly shifts from English to Mitchif to Cree, is an important site of resistance . . . most evident in Campbell's names for her female relatives" ("HalfBreed" 141). Maria describes her experiences with the English language: at a residential school, the officials punish her for speaking Cree (47), and at a public school, her younger sister Peggy is publicly humiliated and terrorized by the teacher (87-8) because she pronounces "this" as "dis." While the English language oppresses and colonizes, Campbell fights back, countering English's authority by interspersing Nêhiyawak and Mitchif words in the text, and gaining control of English by using it to tell her story.

Campbell bears witness to the community's act of resistance to the authority of the English language when she describes how the Halfbreeds confound the authorities investigating a murder in her diverse linguistic community:

The case came up in court but no evidence could be given. The Halfbreeds needed interpreters so if an English-French interpreter was called they would say that they talked only Cree and when a Cree speaker was brought in it was vice versa. By the time the stories were translated, they were so mixed up that the case was closed. (69)

Campbell discloses the linguistic diversity of her community. In doing so, she appropriates and redirects colonizing discourse, while she simultaneously refuses to allow standard English to subsume her text. She describes her community, "[t]he Isbisters, Campbells, and Vandals . . . [as] a real mixture of Scottish, French Cree, English and Irish. We spoke a language completely different from the others" (23-4), who spoke "French mixed with a little Cree" or "more French than English or Cree" (23). Campbell describes a Métis language, Mitchif, which has dialects that vary much as the English language's dialects vary regionally.



Campbell's precise handling of Nêhiyawak and Mitchif terms both resists English text, and allows her to reclaim her diverse linguistic heritages; however, it also allows her to claim a specific Métis heritage. Campbell glosses Cree and Mitchif words foreign to English, and their presence in the text recalls Cree and Métis ideology and oral traditions. She writes that that the Métis were "ak-ee-top (pretend farmers)" (23), providing a parenthetical gloss in the sentence; she glosses her great grandfather's nickname in a similar fashion: "Our old people called him 'Chee-pie-hoos' meaning 'Evil-spirit-jumping-up-and-down'" (10). These are Mitchif words and she accommodatingly translates them in the sentences in which they appear; However, she does not provide such a convenient gloss for Cree words. For example, when she writes about the Indians' Sundances, saying "[w]e were always the poor relatives, the awp-pee-tow-koosons\*" (25), she uses a footnote to translate the word as "half people."<sup>16</sup> She privileges Mitchif words over Cree words by glossing Mitchif in the sentence, and using a footnote to gloss Cree words. By using various languages, and by treating them differently in the text, Campbell emphasizes differences not only amongst the languages, but amongst the cultures of her Métis community, her relations' Cree community, and the culture of the white Euro-Canadians.

When Campbell's narrator reflects on the stories and storytelling methods of her Road Allowance community, she differentiates their verbal art from Euro-Canadians', but she also disrupts patriarchal assumptions at work in her own community. For example, Maria undermines her own assertions about how stories are passed on in her community saying, "[m]any [stories] were legends handed down from father to son" (18), while the text itself undercuts this assertion. Maria learns story-telling from her great grandmother and other female relations. In the paragraphs following the claim about the transmission of stories, Maria relates the legend of the "little people" (18) as her Cheechum has told it to her. Thus she claims a matrilineal

---

<sup>16</sup> While the "Indians" call them "half people," Campbell's Mitchif speaking community name themselves "Ka-tip-aim-soot-chic," which translates as "the people who own themselves" (Petrone 137).

legacy of stories, showing they are passed from grandmother to granddaughter. Trickster-like, the text says one thing and enacts another.

The Road Allowance people's story-telling practices contrast with the genre classifications prevalent in English literature. Describing the community's stories, Maria recalls that "many of them had a lesson but mostly they were fun stories about funny people" (18). The distinction between teaching stories and stories told purely for entertainment is not always clear, so genres are impossible to categorize absolutely. Campbell's narrative resembles Trickster narratives in many ways in that *Half-Breed* disrupts notions of genres and boundaries, while the Trickster character unsettles and destabilizes assumptions about fixed categories and boundaries.

Maria's storytelling craft shows Cheechum's influence at work in the histories concerning the "Half-Breed" people. Campbell informs the reader early in the book that Cheechum was a niece of Gabriel Dumont, and that "her whole family fought beside Riel and Dumont during the Rebellion. She often told me stories of the Rebellion and of the Halfbreed people" (11). Cheechum's stories influence Campbell's understanding of the history of the Halfbreed people presented in Chapter One. Maria recalls a history of "Half-Breed" government that followed their way of life: "the order and discipline of the great Buffalo Hunts" provided a structure for that government (3). Campbell, recalling Cheechum's aiding of the "rebels" of the rebellion, emphasizes a history repeated from Cheechum's eye-witness accounts, and one that differs from Canadian history books. Campbell retells how Cheechum and her son (Campbell's Grandfather) survived after the death of Great Grandfather because Cheechum chose an independent life at Maria Lake, even staging an armed resistance to RCMP who tried to move her off her land once it was "claimed" as park land (10). Cheechum not only tells Maria family legends and histories, but also community legends, for example, stories about the "little people" (180), and she tells Maria stories about the "traditional" way of life that they witness at Montreal Lake (42). Campbell is initiated into storytelling by hearing stories from her Cheechum.

Campbell's Trickster-like text resists characterization as a "traditional" story because she writes autobiographically, employing a genre which undermines the

communal world view sustained by traditional stories. Moreover, although Campbell's text traces the negative effect of individuality, it simultaneously asserts its individuality. This tension plays out in Maria's attempts to deny her identity. She avoids other Native people saying:

I knew that as long as I stayed away [from Native people] I would somehow always survive, because I didn't have to feel guilty about taking from white people. With my own people, I would have had to share. (143)

Campbell's text is like much contemporary Indigenous people's writing in that the central character's journey from community brings disaster, a theme that reinforces the tensions between "traditional" life and life in the mainstream. Paula Gunn Allen writes, "The horrors that visit an Indian who attempts isolate[sic] individuality have been movingly depicted. . . . This concentration on the negative effect of individuality forms a major theme in the oral literatures of all tribes" (Allen "Introduction" 6). Campbell's text depicts the negative effect of individuality. However, it also depicts the necessity of asserting individuality, demonstrating the potential diversity within a community.

Campbell uses the text to situate and identify her ancestral community, and even create it, thus transforming autobiography to disclose the origins of a people. Métis history provides the backdrop against which Campbell's story plays out. As Kim Blaeser writes,

the autobiographical method has been appropriated by Native writers and has undergone significant alterations. Often, for example, the story becomes that of a people, a history, and a place, and only secondarily that of an individual. (*Gerald Vizenor* 100)

Campbell's text can be read as a historical chronicle of the Métis people in Saskatchewan, and in particular, as a creation chronicle of the "Road Allowance" (8) people, and the narrator, while an individual, also represents the community. She appears to write to a white Euro-Canadian audience: "I write this for all of you, to tell you what it is like to be a Halfbreed woman in our country" (2). Yet, the text speaks in a voice familiar to a Nêhiyawak and Métis audience through its use of oral story

telling techniques. The autobiographical genre lets her express an indigenous self in a European literary form that focuses on the development of the individual.

Canadian indigenous story-telling traditions have been influenced by English literature, but in Campbell's text, Indigenous oral story telling conventions influence autobiographical literature.<sup>17</sup> A heritage of hybridity allows Maria Campbell to use oral arts and Trickster characteristics to inform the narrator's character. Campbell's narrator grows out of a merging of an oral world and a textual world, and some of the characters she creates have their roots in mythological narratives and archetypes that have developed in oral arts. Translating key elements of oral arts to text is not only a matter of preservation and adaptation, but also a matter of subversion. Rather than abandoning oral arts to history, Campbell adapts them to a textual milieu, showing that hybridity signals change, but not necessarily loss.

---

<sup>17</sup> For a view of the assimilation of European folk-tales into the oral traditions of North American Indigenous peoples, see Jarold Ramsey's essay "Ti-Jean and the Seven-Headed Dragon: Instances of Native American Assimilation of European Folklore."

## Chapter Three

### The Word Warrior

#### In

### *Woman Warrior*

Maxine Hong Kingston's memoir, *The Woman Warrior*, not only creates a textual bridge between the oral culture of her childhood and the mainstream culture of her adulthood, but it also gives her a creative space to translate her Chinese language "talk-story" to text.<sup>1</sup> The talk-story elements Kingston uses in the text were learned in, and shaped by, the Chinese-American community in Stockton, California. Transcribing these elements as text, she speaks back to the racist discourse that has attempted to circumscribe her identity as a Chinese-American woman. Kingston draws on oral stories learned from her Chinese mother, and blends talk-story characters to frame her construction of the young Maxine. Kingston undermines English literary conventions by using oral story telling elements in her memoirs, by translating heroic female characters from Chinese oral tradition into an English-language text, and by redefining the Western image of the hero. Shaping both the narrator and the memoir by direct reference and allusion to talk-story and talk-story heroes, Kingston shows the development of a Chinese-American woman author and fashions a place for herself in a world of English language texts. Furthermore, she transforms the oral stories learned from her mother by reinventing them to reflect her Chinese-American experience, as well as the Chinese tradition out of which they come.

*The Woman Warrior* self-consciously privileges oral narratives inherited matrilineally, emphasizing how orality has educated Maxine. Kingston constructs

---

<sup>1</sup> Maxine Hong Kingston describes "'talk-story' as an oral tradition of history, mythology, genealogy, bedtime stories, and how-to stories that have been passed down through generations, an essential part of family and community life" (Medoff 257).

narrative segments that illustrate Maxine's aural/oral influences, and shows how they have shaped her perceptions. Mother Hong's talk-stories teach Maxine about the dynamic relationship between oral performer and audience. For example, her mother's stories mark the stages of her development such as menstruation:

"Whenever she had to warn us about life, my mother told stories . . . a story to grow up on" (5). A developing Maxine impels Mother Hong, an oral performer, to tell stories appropriate to her audience's needs. Furthermore, the relationship between story-teller and audience creates an intimacy unique to oral performance. Kingston illustrates this intimacy through Maxine's recollection of Mother Hong's voice penetrating her dreams: "Night after night my mother would talk-story until we fell asleep. I couldn't tell where the stories left off and the dreams began, her voice the voice of the heroines in my sleep" (19). Mother Hong talks-story, teaching Maxine to listen, preparing her to talk-story, and modelling methods and characters for Maxine to build on.

Mother Hong's stories about women warriors inspire Maxine to imagine herself, at different times, as either Fa Mu Lan or as the warrior poet, Ts'ai Yen. The woman warrior character, Fa Mu Lan,<sup>2</sup> whom Maxine knows from her mother's stories, suggests transformation and subversion because she destabilizes gender boundaries, and consequently, the status quo. Mu Lan poses as a man to lead armies to victory. Fa Mu Lan's story may affirm the equal capabilities of the sexes; however, at the same time, the song asserts a daughter's duty to her family: a daughter volunteers to replace her father in his army draft because he has no elder son to send. The song shows how a daughter can serve her father, providing an archetype for filial behavior. However, the song also shows a daughter behaving adventurously and independently. The poet Ts'ai Yen is neither entirely a creation of Kingston's

---

<sup>2</sup> "The Ballad of Mulan" exists in several versions, all anonymous, but the woman who is the subject of the ballad lived during the Six dynasties period between A.D. 220 - 588 (Liu 77). Drawing on themes from the Mu Lan stories, Kingston stresses the mutability of the myth, saying that "'The White Tigers' is not a Chinese myth but one transformed by America, a sort of kung fu movie parody" ("Cultural Misreadings" 57). In Liu's "Mulan," the girl is not punished upon revealing her gender to her "camp mates," and "the Khan" offers her reward for ten years of service (Liu 78-79). The last stanza stresses the similarity of the genders: "when the two run side by side, / How much alike they seem!" (Liu 80).

imagination, nor of Mother Hong's talk-story, because she is a historical Chinese woman poet, kidnapped and forced to live with Tartar "barbarians."<sup>3</sup> The poet-daughter of a political official, Ts'ai Yen is ransomed, but not quickly returned home. While in captivity, she bears two children, but she remains an outsider. Her lament poem mourns her kidnapping, but also her return to a deserted home twelve years later. Her escape from slavery is bittersweet because freedom means the loss of her new family too. In *Woman Warrior* this character stands as a metaphor both for the merging of distinct cultures and traditions, and for an artist's power to transform those traditions. Both characters are female warriors -- one a "swordswoman," one a "words" woman -- and both characters suggest transformation. The women avenger characters from Mother Hong's talk-story offer Maxine inspiration, as does Mother Hong herself.

By telling her mother's biography, Maxine acknowledges her debt to orality, provides a genealogy for herself, and a history for her mother, Brave Orchid. Maxine describes Mother Hong's training in orality and her life in China, as well as introducing her aunts, "No Name Woman" and "Moon Orchid." Genealogy and family history are examples of the "highly specialized information" (Ong 141) presented in oral traditions. This information contextualizes family connections, provides a history of that family, and connects the narrator to family traditions. The genealogical genre, in addition, has a protective function, which Maxine learns about from her Mother: "when she got scared as a child, one of my mother's three mothers had held her and chanted their descent line, reeling the frightened spirit back from the farthest deserts" (75). Brave Orchid teaches Maxine that to recite a descent line is to call a spirit back to its ancestral home. Maxine's Brave Orchid stories not only show Mother Hong's strength, resourcefulness, and independence, but also her proficiency in oral arts. In China, after her husband has emigrated to America, she earns a medical diploma, practices medicine, and commands respect. Her diploma declares

---

<sup>3</sup> Ts'ai Yen was "carried north as a prisoner, and married to a Tartar chieftain," and her song "The Lamentation" provides an "early record of the heroic and tragic elements in Chinese literature" (Liu 538).

her proficiency in "Midwifery, Pediatrics, Gynecology, Medecine [sic], Surgary [sic], Therapeutics, Ophthalmology, Bacteriology, Dermatology, Nursing, and Bandage" (57). Because she earns a degree from an institution that practices oral learning, chants and recitations are integral components of her studies. Mother Hong's talk-story narratives teach Maxine that in China, women do command respect. In her stories, she and the other students address each other formally, as "Lady Scholar" (62). Mother Hong, who claims to be a ghost fighter and shape shifter, is also a scientist, and a religious specialist, trained in ceremonial cures. For example, Mother Hong performs the ghost chasing ritual and chants, making the To Keung School of Midwifery safe for its students (75). She resembles a traditional female Shaman known as "wu seeress" and "ritual evoker" who also has the ability to "see and combat ghosts" (Yen 88-9). Mother Hong's professional calling contributes to her talk-story narratives as she recounts experiences which result from her medical duties. She teaches her daughter about narrative transformations by transforming images of women, showing them as warriors, poets, scientists, and doctors. Her narratives provide an alternative view of femininity to the one Maxine learns in her community.

From her mother, Maxine learns the power of language to shape and reshape reality. In her role as ghost fighter and shape shifter, Mother Hong uses oaths, curses and hexes, and other forms of sacred speech, much as a shaman would. In her role as student, she learns a specialist language that qualifies her for a career. Her career as a Doctor allows her autonomy, and she supports herself while her husband lives in America. For *Brave Orchid*, language is power. Mother Hong does not allow language to limit her, and this lesson she teaches her daughter. Because Maxine's mother is both shaman and scholar, she educates her daughter as such, introducing Maxine to a feminine deity when she mentions "the Queen of Heaven" in a story she tells (87-88), and teaching Maxine about the powerful symbol of the dragon, which she claims as her own totem and Maxine's too (67). Mother Hong's term of endearment for Maxine is "Little Dog"(109) which is usually reserved for boys and



“used affectionately” (204). This term contradicts Maxine’s claims that her parents dislike her because she is a girl. In fact, by calling her “Little Dog,” they confer respect on their daughter. Mother Hong uses language in a powerful manner and she teaches its power, as well as the power of voice and narrative.

Mother Hong teaches her daughter the components of talk-story narrative when she uses repetition and sound, emphasizing their link with memory. For example, Mother Hong recounts her adventures as a “ghost chaser” in China, describing the fiery rituals needed to drive spirits away, and repeating a particular sound, thus creating narrative memory. Maxine recalls: “‘Whup. Whup.’ My mother told the sound of new fire so that I remember it. ‘Whup. Whup.’” (74). Brave Orchid also teaches Maxine talk-story conventions. For example, the phrase, “One twilight”(87) is the formula that signals the beginning of a horror story. Maxine recalls the effect the mere words had on her physical reality: “already the chills travelled my back and crossed my shoulders; the hair rose at the nape and the back of the legs” (87). Mother Hong teaches Maxine by example how language affects reality.

Mother Hong changes reality through language, undermining patriarchal ideology and providing a subversive model of female behavior for Maxine. For example, flouting her husband’s wishes, Brave Orchid tells Maxine about a “No-Name” paternal aunt whose infidelity attracted the wrath and retaliation of an entire village in China, and whose subsequent suicide further shamed her family. Mother Hong urges Maxine to silence, saying “‘You must not tell anyone’ . . . ‘what I am about to tell you’”(3). Just as Mother Hong rejects being censored however, so does Maxine. Even as she recounts Mother Hong’s warning, she defies it by writing the tale of the “No Name Woman.” Mother Hong further cautions Maxine: “Don’t let your father know that I told you. He denies her” (5). The narrator recalls believing “words so strong and fathers so frail that ‘aunt’ would do my father mysterious harm” (15). As the narrator matures she realizes that words are less strong and fathers less frail than she believed when she was a girl. However, the young narrator correctly

reads her mother's admonition as a sign of the power of women's speech. In Maxine's childhood understanding of men and women, women wield formidable power. In fact, Maxine once believed that perhaps "women were once so dangerous that they had to have their feet bound" (19). The narrator's understanding of language is shaped by Mother Hong's subversive behaviour, breaking silence, revealing secrets and exploding racist and sexist stereotypes of silent, subservient, and "inscrutable" Chinese women.<sup>4</sup>

Brave Orchid also teaches her daughter that women, even in China, can have many roles, a lesson the narrator passes on to her readers. The narrator's retelling of her mother's stories provides a voice, and consequently a personality, for the "Chinese laundress," a stereotyped character in American narrative discourse. Maxine remarks "[i]f you don't talk, you can't have a personality" (180), and her sentiment resonates outside the narrative world. Stereotypes are voiceless images, denied personalities, so as Maxine recounts her mother's life in China, she recreates both the voice and the personality of Brave Orchid, as well as the woman's diverse roles. The self-confident Mother Hong becomes an adept talk-story artist whose career training in medicine is predicated upon orality. Brave Orchid's days as a student were, initially, difficult for her. Maxine explains that her Mother suffered from self-doubt when she began her oral studies: "she suspected she did not have the right kind of brains either, my father the one who can recite whole poems" (64). However, Mother Hong becomes an excellent student, proving that she does have "the right kind of brains." Brave Orchid explains to Maxine that in medical school, she would "chant the symptoms, and those few words would start a whole chapter of cures tumbling out. Most people don't have the kind of brains that can do that" (64). The narrator, however, is more awed with Brave Orchid's talk-story talents than her academic achievements: her woman warrior stories are epics, continuing on for days.

---

<sup>4</sup> Kingston herself writes that she did not foresee "the critics measuring the book and me against the stereotype of the exotic, inscrutable, mysterious oriental"; She quotes five critics who use the word "inscrutable" in their reviews, exclaiming "How dare they call their ignorance our inscrutability!" ("Cultural Misreadings" 55-56).

Brave Orchid bequeaths Maxine the song of the woman warrior and she claims it as her legacy: "this chant that was once mine, given me by my mother" (20). The narrator shows how the gift-song becomes Maxine's survival tool, encouraging her to explore and to create her own reality.

Before Maxine starts school, she does not know that the dominant culture finds her "other" because of her race, heritage, and language. From her perspective, people from American mainstream culture who speak English are "other," because her reality is constructed from Chinese language and culture. Maxine's moment of revelation about the possibilities of language to create and recreate reality happens through a collision of perspectives which Kingston's narrator recreates in the text. A garbage man overhears the children speaking Chinese, and unaware that they are talking about him, he attempts to mimic their language:

The ghost looked directly at us. Steadying the load on his back with one hand, the Garbage Ghost walked up to the window . . . Slowly he opened his red mouth, 'The...Gar...bage...Ghost,' he said, copying human language, 'Garbage Ghost?' We ran, screaming to our mother. (98)

The English speaking reader is alienated by the suggestion that English is a non-human language just as Maxine is alienated by the discovery that "ghosts" can talk. This collision of perspectives illustrates how language constructs worlds, and foreshadows the reconstruction of Maxine's world by English in the American school system.

When Maxine begins to attend school, her relationship to language and speech changes and her critical engagement with language becomes a shaping force. Upon realizing she has to speak English at school, Maxine at first "[becomes] silent" (165), and through silence she becomes aware of the power of sound. The narrator reconstructs the school girl's engagement with language and sound, so demonstrating Maxine's discomfort with orality and her resistance to both the languages she speaks. To resolve issues of language and identity, Maxine must engage critically with English and Chinese. She does this by reflecting self-consciously on her voice: "I read aloud in first grade, though, and heard the barest whisper with little squeaks come out

of my throat. 'Louder,' said the teacher, who scared the voice away again" (166). Maxine raises her voice: "When it was my turn [to recite in class] . . . I was loud . . . I was glad I didn't whisper" (169). Maxine is not only obeying the teacher. The narrator observes that "Chinese communication was loud, public" (11), describing Maxine's attempts to conquer her discomfort with orality by being loud as if to show that she gains confidence through loudness which is modelled by her Chinese-American community. Even as an adult, the American-born English-proficient narrator confesses that "[a] dumbness -- a shame -- still cracks my voice in two" (165). She is repelled by the sound of English on her tongue: "It spoils my day with self disgust when I hear my broken voice come skittering out into the open" (165). However, the narrator describes Maxine's discomfort with the sound of her Chinese language speaking voice too. The Chinese community's American name-giver says to Maxine's mother "You better do something with this one. . . . She has an ugly voice. She quacks like a pressed duck" (192). Maxine accepts this, saying herself that she "whispered and quacked" (200), and agreeing: "She was right: if you squeezed the duck hung up to dry in the east window, the sound that was my voice would come out of it" (192). However, when Maxine comments on the similarity between her voice and the voice of an opera singer that the community admires, she undermines these descriptions by associating her voice with the voices of high culture: Chinese opera. Ultimately, Maxine's distinctive voice represents her distinct perspective, and marks her resistance to, and subversion of, both English and Chinese.

In treating Maxine's early schooling, however, the narrator recreates a phase of Maxine's development in which she internalizes the racism of the mainstream community and learns to hate her mother's Chinese culture. As her mother-tongue culture conflicts with the mainstream, she questions Mother Hong's teachings, rejecting her own mother-tongue, and accusing her mother of making her stupid and distorting her voice: "It's your fault I talk weird. The only reason I flunked kindergarten was because you couldn't teach me English and you gave me a zero IQ" (201). Cultural tension plays out as tension between mother and daughter. The text's

engagement with orality/aurality is dramatized in the memoir through Maxine's resistance to her mother's talk-story, a resistance that comes with Maxine's immersion in American school culture. Although Maxine is American born, her bi-culturation contributes to a disorientating childhood.<sup>5</sup> She believes she can fit in with mainstream culture if she is American-feminine. To become American feminine, she must reject what is Chinese feminine, starting with her mother.

When she begins to succeed in school, Maxine rejects her mother's talk-story in favour of Western discourse. She defends her choice, saying: "They say I'm smart now. Things follow in lines at school. They take stories and teach us to turn them into essays" (201). Because her IQ score comes up, she believes that she is smarter, not just more culturally conditioned to do well on the test. The narrator recollects Maxine's determination to employ Western linear logic as a weapon against her mother's talk-story. Maxine's "Americanization," or experience of the culture outside her home, increases friction between her and her mother. As she grows up "American," she learns how to dismiss her mother's talk-story art. Eventually, the teenage Maxine confronts her mother:

I don't want to listen to any more of your stories; they have no logic. They scramble me up. You lie with stories. You won't tell me a story and then say, 'This is a true story,' or, 'This is just a story.' I can't tell the difference. I can't tell what's real and what you make up. I don't even know what your real names are. (202)<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> Bonnie TuSmith argues that Chinese America is "not a 'bicultural' dualism of either/or possibilities [but] a *new entity*. . . neither Chinese nor European" (284). I refer to Maxine's experience as "bi-cultural" for convenience. As TuSmith points out, "Because many people have difficulty with this concept (since we are so used to thinking in stereotypes and polarities), they sort between 'Chinese' and 'American' along with the naive narrator. . . . [this] sorting does not reflect Kingston's [sic] worldview [but] is an artistic device used to create thematic tension between the female individual as protagonist and the ethnic community as antagonist" (284).

<sup>6</sup> The narrator may refer to a common cultural practice: "Personal name-changing is frequent and common in China. We all change, or add, new personal names, at different periods of our lives. We thus have milk names, school names, official and unofficial names, courtesy names, book names, genealogical names, sickness names (to cheat the demons of disease), style names, studio names, names on taking a degree or high office or being honoured, post-humous names; poets adopt fresh names to suit their moods, or even when moving abode. Only the family names, which in China always comes first, and not last as in the West, cannot be changed" (Han Suyin *A Mortal Flower* 50).

Alienated from her mother's ways of knowing, Maxine says "I had to leave home in order to see the world logically, logic the new way of seeing" (204). In seeking "to see the world logically," she regains her appreciation for talk-story. At the same time that Maxine celebrates "lines," she shows how orality has shaped her.

Maxine's childhood accusation that her mother "lie[s] with stories" contrasts with the narrator's adult perspective, which recognizes that truth changes with perspective and that fiction offers different perspectives. While "logic" appears to be antithesis to Mother Hong's orality, the adult narrator uses both logic and talk-story to recall her formative years. So, while the child Maxine accuses her mother of lying with the stories, and accuses the stories of confusing her by blurring boundaries between fiction and reality, the narrator has come to accept her mother's narratives. The narrator recounts Brave Orchid's history in "Shaman," and says "my mother would have flown stories as factual as bats into the listening night. A practical woman, she could not invent stories and told only true ones" (66).

Because Maxine's mother's stories are oral, they exist only in sound and memory. Maxine cannot turn back the pages of her mother's story to verify details. In "No Name Woman" Maxine comments that her "Chinese brother and sister had died of an unknown sickness" (13). Many years later, when she asks her mother about "Oldest Daughter" and "Oldest Son," her Mother says "You must have been making up stories. You are all the children there are" (103). Yet, Moon Orchid, Maxine's aunt, recalls the "two real Chinese babies who died" (132). Unlike information in a book, the information in talk-story is not retrievable, and not verifiable.

Paradoxically, the more Maxine protests her Mother's narrative technique, the more readers notice Kingston's reliance on that same technique. Maxine's protests against Mother Hong's stories, combined with the memoir's translation of oral methods to text, are tools which allow Kingston to undermine the authority of linear stories and thought. While young Maxine's words stand as accusation, the text itself becomes a justification of the mother's talk-stories. Thus, Kingston's memoir illustrates by example its relationship with talk-story. While Maxine claims that her

mother lies with stories and that she prefers that things follow "in lines," Kingston's text allies itself with Mother Hong's talk-story style. For example, the narrator tells the story of her mother's sister, Moon Orchid, from a third person point of view. There is no Maxine in this chapter, "At The Western Palace." It relates how Mother Hong's sister comes from China to America and, following the directions of her sister, attempts to reclaim her husband who has emigrated to America and begun an American life with an American wife, although he still financially supports Moon Orchid. However, in the following chapter "A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe," Maxine confesses to fabricating the narrative. Her fabrication is based on someone else's eye witness account. She reports that she actually heard about the reunion from her brother who witnessed it. The narrator confesses "what my brother actually said . . ." (163), and offers a second version of the story's events. The second version of Moon Orchid's story is Maxine's account of a conversation between herself and her brother. However, this version is overturned too, in the subsequent paragraph, when Maxine confesses that "In fact, it wasn't me my brother told about going to Los Angeles; one of my sisters told me what he'd told her. His version of the story may be better than mine because of its bareness, not twisted into designs. The hearer can carry it tucked away without it taking up much room" (163). Maxine's versions of story events change, much as her mother's do. In fact, she expresses her desire to become an "outlaw knotmaker" (164), a desire she fulfills by twisting narratives into designs. Kingston's text displays the characteristics that young Maxine identifies and resists in her mother's talk-story.

Thus, Maxine employs the very narrative devices that her mother does, reporting events she has not witnessed and testing her audience's ability to "establish realities." The narrator recollects, "[w]henever she had to warn us about life, [she] told us stories . . . She tested our strength to establish realities" (5). Likewise, the narrator shows Maxine testing her own strength to establish realities by creating fictions. She conjures differing versions of her "No Name" aunt's extra-marital pregnancy, fleshing out details that her mother has omitted, such as who the father

was, and where the pair met. Maxine imagines that “[p]erhaps she had encountered him in the fields . . . perhaps he first noticed her in the marketplace. . . . Perhaps he worked an adjoining field”(6). Maxine then abandons the tentative “perhaps” in favor of statements in the indicative mood: “His [sexual] demand must have surprised, then terrified her,” and “she obeyed him; she always did as she was told”(6). She ends the story with certainty: “He organized the raid on her” (7). Maxine then offers a “romantic” version of the story, describing the aunt’s preoccupation with improving her appearance: “[s]he wanted him to look back” (9). However, the romantic version ends in catastrophe too, and Maxine describes the child’s birth and her aunt’s death in detail. In effect, Maxine employs narrative devices learned from her mother in that she reports events she has not witnessed: “mother spoke about the raid as if she had seen it, when she and my aunt, a daughter-in-law to a different household, should not have been living together at all” (7).

Sharing another instance of contradiction, both Mother Hong and the narrator assert that confessions are maddening, but each woman uses confession. The narrator recounts coming home for a visit, and receiving a midnight visit from her mother who needs to confess: “When I go to work, [your father] eats leftovers. He doesn’t cook new food,” she said, confessing, me maddened at confessions” (104). This scene echoes young Maxine’s discovery of ““talking-to-the-top-magician”” (199) and confession, when she decides to tell her mother a “list of over two hundred things” (199). However, Mother Hong snaps: ““I can’t stand this whispering. . . .Senseless gabblings every night. I wish you would stop. Go away and work. Whispering, whispering, making no sense. Madness. I don’t feel like hearing your craziness”” (200). The similarities between Mother Hong and her daughter are revealed through Maxine’s resistance to her mother’s ways. In fact, Maxine’s resistance is learned from *Brave Orchid*.

Through talk-story, *Brave Orchid* instills in Maxine the tools to resist colonization from a dominant racist culture which seeks to teach her to hate what is Chinese, including her mother tongue. The narrator points to the beauty of her mother’s culture



and language by commenting on the American reception to Chinese language: "You can see the disgust on American faces. . . . It is the way Chinese sounds, chingchong ugly, to American ears, not beautiful like Japanese sayonara words with consonants and vowels as regular as Italian" (171). However, Maxine's biographical sketch of her Mother treats the reader to a contrasting view of Mother Hong's Chinese language. Mother Hong, while still in China, purchases a "slave" whose merits rest partially on the regularity of her heartbeat. According to Maxine's mother, a good heartbeat, nature's landscapes, and the Chinese language are closely related: "My mother could find no flaw in the beat; it matched her own, the real rhythm. There were people jumpy with silly rhythms; broken rhythms; sly, secretive rhythms. They did not follow the sounds of earth-sea-sky and the Chinese language" (80). Mother Hong teaches Maxine that her mother tongue mimics nature and beauty because it imitates the sounds of its environment.

By examining first person pronouns in English and Chinese, Maxine sorts through the identities available to her. She declares that she will not be bound and broken in the manner that the Chinese "break the women with their own tongues" (47). The women must use "a Chinese word for the female I -- which is 'slave'" (47). She warns, "[y]ou can't entrust your voice to the Chinese . . . they want to capture your voice for their own use" (169). However, English appears to want to steal her voice too, and when Maxine encounters the first person English pronoun as she reads aloud, its very presence reduces her to silence: "I stopped often. . . . I could not understand 'I'" (166). Maxine contrasts the complexities of the Chinese pictograph for "I" and the simplicities of the English word for "I." She muses: "The Chinese 'I' has seven strokes, intricacies. How could the American 'I,' assuredly wearing a hat like the Chinese, have only three strokes, the middle so straight?" (166). She initially views the English "I" as a picture that lacks: "Was it out of politeness that this writer left off strokes the way a Chinese has to write her own name small and crooked?" (166-7). However, her assertion that "a Chinese has to write her own name small and crooked" indicates her belief that the Chinese pronoun "I" is inherently misogynistic.

By juxtaposing the English first person singular ungendered pronoun with its gendered Chinese counterpart, Kingston demonstrates a dual act of resistance: resistance to being culturally subsumed by English, and resistance to being bound by what Maxine perceives as the sexism of “traditional” Chinese culture. Maxine’s resistance to both Chinese and English helps her construct a version of self using the tools of both languages. She asserts that vengeance lies in words and that she has “so many words -- ‘chink’ words and ‘gook’ words too -- that they do not fit on my skin” (53).

Maxine wants revenge not only for the English “chink” and “gook” words, but also for the sexist insults she hears from her family and community. Her revenge on her community is in the reporting of her life in the memoir. Narration becomes vengeance, a response to the sexism of her community. She says “The idioms for *revenge* are ‘report a crime’ and ‘report to five families.’ The reporting is the vengeance, not the beheading, not the gutting, but the words” (53). Her weapons are the words that have influenced her sense of self. She repeats sayings such as, “When fishing for treasures in the flood, be careful not to pull in girls” (52) in an act of vengeance, a way to shame the culture that sustains them. The repeating and reporting of misogynist sayings identifies them as crimes. Maxine demonstrates that silences and omissions can be repeated too, when she reports that she once read in an anthropology book “that Chinese say ‘Girls are necessary too’”; but, she adds, “I have never heard the Chinese I know make this concession. Perhaps it was a saying in another village” (52-53).<sup>7</sup> While narration becomes vengeance, English also becomes an instrument of revenge. Maxine frequently hears her great uncle curse her and his granddaughters:

‘Maggots! Where are my grandsons? I want grandsons! Give me grandsons! Maggots!’ He pointed at each one of us, “Maggot! Maggot! Maggot! Maggot! Maggot! Maggot!” Then he dived into his food, eating fast and getting

---

<sup>7</sup> Bonnie TuSmith suggests that “The misogynistic sayings which are repeated throughout the text must be understood in relation to the Chinese bachelor society in America. As a result of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, Chinese women were extremely scarce for several generations in this country. . . . This historical fact might have contributed to a brand of male defensiveness . . . which is unique to the Chinese American experience” (286).

seconds. 'Eat, maggots,' he said. 'Look at the maggots chew.' (191)  
Retaliating in English with "'Our old man hates us too. What assholes'" (191),  
Maxine and her cousins exclude the old man. "English," the instrument of her  
colonization becomes a weapon of vengeance she can wield against the misogyny of  
her community. Because Maxine has resisted both English and Chinese, she learns  
that while language manipulates her, she can manipulate language, composing both  
self and reality. She creates a warrior self to initiate vengeance and resist the way  
others have used language to compose her.

Maxine's training as a talk-story artist parallels the woman warrior's training  
to become an avenger. Maxine says that her mother "said I would grow up a wife and  
a slave, but she taught me the song of the warrior woman, Fa Mu Lan. I would have  
to grow up a warrior woman" (20). She imagines a warrior self that she constructs by  
emulating her mother's talk-story warrior characters, and the character she describes  
is the character she becomes. Both have similar journeys. The woman warrior's  
fifteen years sequestration with the old people, learning warrior ways parallels  
Maxine's childhood and adolescence with her mother, learning Chinese language and  
talk-story. As a child Maxine is isolated from both community and family by her  
involvement with American culture, and she is isolated from America by her  
involvement with Chinese culture. Likewise, the woman warrior is isolated from her  
family and community by her involvement with the old people, and then from the  
community of warriors she leads by her gender. The woman warrior's training in  
martial arts reflects Maxine's training in oral arts. The events and trials the woman  
warrior undergoes strengthen her to perform her task, and contribute to her skill as a  
warrior. Similarly, Maxine's childhood alienation contributes to the development of  
her talk-story voice.

Maxine's description of her woman warrior persona's battle preparation is a  
metaphor for Maxine's talk-story apprenticeship. The warrior is prepared for her  
destiny in battle by a final act of initiation performed by her parents, who carve  
"revenge" into her skin, marking her back with scripts, names, and oaths, so that

“whatever happens to you, people will know our sacrifice” (34-35).<sup>8</sup> They turn the woman warrior’s body into text, an act that symbolically connects her to writing. Maxine undergoes a similar mutilation, but in a way that symbolically connects her to orality. Her mother clips her frenum so that Maxine will not be “tongue tied. [Her] tongue would be able to move in any language. [She would] be able to speak languages that are completely different from one another. [She would] be able to pronounce anything” (164). Mother Hong’s act symbolically empowers Maxine to have confidence in her speaking voice, no matter what language she uses. The woman warrior is wounded in a way that represents text, while Maxine is wounded in a way that foreshadows her abilities in oral arts.

Maxine’s memories of her childhood, and her recall of her engagement with mother’s talk-story talent reflect her destiny as oral performer. In the chapter entitled “White Tigers,” the narrator recalls the song of the woman warrior, a gift that she received in childhood from her mother who “might not have known of its power to remind” (20). Hearing the “chant of Fa Mu Lan” transports the narrator back to childhood, triggering memories of when she sang the woman warrior song with her mother (20). She recalls a story her mother tells about the woman warrior who invents a new martial art, white crane boxing, through observing and mimicking a white crane: this “was one of the tamer, more modern stories, mere introductions. My mother told others that followed swordswomen through woods and palaces for years” (19). The power of these memories persuades Maxine to reconsider her mother’s stories, and she proclaims a new understanding of her mother’s talk-story: “At last I saw that I too had been in the presence of great power, my mother talking-story” (20). Maxine observes her mother’s performance, learns from it, and adapts it to a textual form. Like her mother’s stories that follow warriors for years, Maxine’s story follows her own years spent learning to talk-story.

---

<sup>8</sup> The woman warrior’s skin-carving scene is also found in a story about General Yue Fei’s mother who “tattooed *jingzhong baogua* (serve your country with adamant loyalty) on the back of her son” (Lau “Kingston” 45) Han Suyin tells a slightly different version in *Destination Chungking*. She describes women whose souls are “like steel blades,” like General Yueh Fei’s mother, who engraved on his skin “that he might never forget -- ‘Faithful to country until death’” (92).

Both Maxine and the woman warrior strike out on heroic quests. The woman warrior is an avenger. She rides with the Kuan Kung, the god of war and literature, conquering the Baron and tearing down the “ancestral tablets,” saying “here we’ll put on operas; we’ll sing together and talk-story” (45). Maxine’s quest is to master language and talk-story, and the woman warrior’s triumph reflects Maxine’s when she becomes a talk-story artist. Maxine’s new style of talk-story, learned from her mother but marked by her own intonations, allows her to privilege an oral tradition learned from her mother by translating it to text.

While the woman warrior receives a call to her vocation as avenger from a mystical source, a bird’s call, Maxine is summoned to talk-story by an imagination which is nourished by her mother’s narratives and inspired by the ideographs of the Chinese language. Chinese language and writing play a significant role in Maxine’s development because they nurture notions of relationship between reality and image on paper. For example, the warrior persona anticipates her summons to warrior training, imagining that “[t]he call would come from a bird that flew over our roof. In the brush drawings it looks like the ideograph for ‘human,’ two black wings” (20). She associates an oral call with painted ideographs which are designs for the realities they name. Maxine says, “[t]he bird would cross the sun and lift into the mountains (which look like the ideograph ‘mountain’), there parting the mist briefly that swirled opaque again. I would be a little girl of seven the day I followed the bird away into the mounts” (20). The mountains of Maxine’s imagination look like the ideograph for mountain, and inspire her description of Chinese pictographs and the relationship she sees between ideographs and reality.

Woman warrior and word warrior both receive a call to their vocations and physical training. The woman warrior’s call to warriorhood comes from a bird, long associated with song and poetry, and Maxine’s call to talk-story comes from the song her mother gives her. Maxine describes the woman warrior’s physical training, which functions as a metaphor for her own training in the performance of talk-story. The warrior trains her body by learning to move her “fingers, hands, feet, head, and entire

body in circles. [She] walked putting heel down first, toes pointing outward thirty to forty degrees, making the ideograph 'eight,' making the ideograph 'human.' . . . [she] could copy owls and bats, the words for 'bat' and 'blessing' homonyms" (13). The talk-story performer learns how to use body as a prop in performance and like the warrior, spends time using the body to hone the art of word making.

The woman warrior's instruction from the old people finds its parallel in Maxine's instruction in talk-story tactics. The woman warrior learns the art of silence and its importance to survival. The old woman advises her: "The first thing you have to learn . . . is how to be quiet" (23). For Maxine, the memory of her silence in kindergarten contributes to her knowledge of the power of voice. Silence, in oral story telling, contributes to the structure of the tale. The woman warrior's survival instruction includes learning that each creature teaches a "hiding skill" (23), the counterpart of its "fighting skill." Silence is the "hiding skill," while talk-story is the "fighting skill." Maxine's "hiding skill" is developed as mainstream culture attempts to colonize her, and she uses her period of silence as a time to anticipate speech. Her silence begins when she enters English-speaking Kindergarten:

My silence was thickest -- total -- during the three years that I covered my school paintings with black paint. . . . I was making a stage curtain, and it was the moment before the curtain parted or rose. . . . I spread [the pictures] out (so black and full of possibilities) and pretended the curtains were swinging open, flying up, one after another, sunlight underneath, mighty operas. (165)

That she envisions operas, dramatic performance and song, illustrates her desire to give up silence, to claim her voice, to become a talk-story artist. Silence allows emphasis, transitions, and dramatic effect. When Maxine falls silent in Kindergarten as a response to having to speak English, she covers all her pictures in black and imagines they represent a stage just moments before the performance. She anticipates the possibilities of her blacked-out pictures just as her silence anticipates the possibilities of her voice. This period of anticipation corresponds thematically to the hero's withdrawal from the world, a time that allows him to meditate and prepare for "later deeds" (Leeming 97). In Maxine's woman-warrior story, the child-warrior

grows into a woman warrior after fifteen years of training in warriors' arts (22). Likewise, Maxine is trained in talk-story at her mother's knee.

Both woman warrior and Maxine use their time of training to perfect other critical skills. According to the adult narrator, during the young Maxine's time of silence, she develops other senses which contribute to her critical awareness of language and give her a (false) sense of control over an English speaking authority figure. "First grade was when I discovered eye control; with my seeing I could shrink the teacher down to a height of one inch, gesticulating and mouthing on the horizon" (183). Maxine learns to shrink, silence, and distance the figure; consequently, she uses this ability to construct and vocalize a warrior self. Just as the woman warrior persona practices eye control, learning to "control even the dilations of the pupils inside my irises" (23), Maxine learns "I" control. Both constitute survival techniques. For Maxine, her powers of vision allow her to elude the imposed limits of the labels attached to her by both her language communities. Maxine uses her mother's talk-story characters as "I" controls, and as a frame on which to construct self.

In Maxine's woman warrior's tale, the God of War and Literature immortalizes her in story: "We would always win, Kuan Kung, the god of war and literature riding before me. I would be told of in fairy tales myself" (38). She dreams that "from the words on [her] back, and how they were fulfilled, the villagers would make a legend about [her] perfect filiality" (45). The narrator makes a legend out of Maxine's talk-story development and achievement, and immortalizes herself by providing an ending to a story that Mother Hong begins (206). In her role of female avenger, Maxine rights the wrongs perpetrated by her communities, avenges the sexism that she has experienced at the hands of her Chinese-American community, and the racism that she has experienced at the hands of people such as her American bosses. By translating orality to text, by using the woman warrior persona to construct self, by writing her life, the narrator initiates a "telling" that is much like Maxine's list of two hundred things she must confess to her mother. The ancient woman warrior motif Kingston uses discredits the stereotypes of Chinese women

that have become mythologized by the West. For example, women's foot binding in Chinese cultural practice is well known in the West, while woman warrior narratives are not. However, many woman warrior and female avenger stories exist.<sup>9</sup>

Maxine avenges herself, her Chinese American community, and even her No Name aunt by remembering stories, which combats sexism and racism by naming them. She points out that she cannot really avenge her family in woman-warrior style because no wise old people tutored her and she is not a warrior. Maxine writes "To avenge my family, I'd have to storm across China to take back our farm from the Communists; I'd have to rage across the United States to take back the laundry in New York and the one in California. Nobody in history has conquered and united both North America and Asia" (49). However, Maxine does achieve avenger status through talk story, using it as witness and wielding it as weapon.

---

<sup>9</sup> For a variety of tales featuring tough female heroes, see *Traditional Chinese Stories: Themes and Variations*, edited by Ma and Lau.



## Chapter Four

### The Hero-Bard

in

### *Object Lessons*

*Object Lessons* articulates the growth of a poet whose quest is to mythologize the self in writing by characterizing the growth of the poet-author as a heroic journey. The hero that Eavan Boland fashions herself after is the bard of Celtic legend and myth.<sup>1</sup> For example, the bard Amairgin from Irish mythology is called the first poet of Ireland, and the one to introduce lyric poetry to Ireland (MacKillop 13). As an Irish lyric poet, Boland composes within a bardic legacy. In the process of the composition, she creates the reality she describes, like the bard whose language also affects reality. In Lady Gregory's *Irish Mythology*, for example, Amairgin's supernatural powers are manifested while he recites words to calm the winds and still

---

<sup>1</sup>In the *Dictionary of Celtic Mythology*, James MacKillop traces the history of the word "bard," writing that "The current standard English definition of this Celtic word, denoting a poet of exalted status, i.e., the voice of a nation or people, dates from Thomas Gray's use of it in his poem, 'The Bard' (1757)" (30). According to MacKillop, the role and status of the bard varied from one Celtic nation to another. Bards were singers and poets, and in Ireland, the bard "held a lower rank in the seven orders of fili [poet], of which the highest was the ollam; the bard had not mastered the 350 stories and twelve years of study required to become an ollam" (31). That the bard still captures popular imagination has much to do with the fact that "Bards were generally men of considerable status and authority in Celtic literature, although impoverished bardic scholars appear in a number of Irish narratives" (MacKillop 30). The "exalted status" of the historical poet bard, according to Declan Kiberd, came from the role of poets in Irish society who had immense power, and stood second only to their chieftains in the political pecking order (10). Kiberd compares the 16th century Irish poets to the English court poets saying they too were "to praise the sovereign, excoriate the kingdom's enemies, and appeal in complex lyrics to the shared aesthetic standard of a mandarin class" (11). The status of poets comes from their historical roles in societies, and their mastery of language; this skill means poets work with words and most cultures recognize a sacred connection between words and the world. Celtic poets inherited status because traditional Irish society had a "poetic caste" which encompassed both bard and fili, trained poets who could be either male or female (Todd 84-89).

the seas of a tempest magically created to keep him and his invading force, "the sons of Miled" and the "Sons of the Gael," from landing. When he does arrive on the shores of Ireland, he orally composes and performs a lyric poem (58). Like a figure in a sacred mythic text, Amairgin captures the imagination of more than just poets. For example, popular novelists, such as Morgan Llywelyn, author of *Bard: The Odyssey of the Irish*, have built upon the mythology surrounding this legendary figure. Eavan Boland points to the influence of the bard on Irish poetry when she writes that "there was another tradition, encoded in the lost language of a nation. . . . A land of wounds. . . . If the boy poet was the image of the British tradition, the bardic poet was the shadow left on the Irish one" (80-81). The bard is not only national poet, but also warrior and word warrior, druid and seer, prophet and visionary. The word "bard" resonates with religious mystique and his word(s) affects reality.<sup>2</sup>

While Boland employs the mythology that surrounds the bard to lend resonance to her own poet's life, she also subverts the hero-bard figure, appropriating the image and transforming its legacy of mythology and oral tradition. Boland raises issues of voice and power, destabilizing the hero-bard figure, master of national oral tradition, and redefining that oral tradition. Boland privileges an oral tradition practiced among women in domestic settings. While these voices are lost to the historical record and to lyric poetry, Boland attempts to retrieve them imaginatively. Writing this oral tradition into her own story is an act that signals not a silencing of orality, but the capturing of a particular version of it, written down in a particular historical context. While writing is an act of exclusion, it also signals possibility. Even as Boland translates women's orality to text, she includes women in written contexts, so creating new possibilities for old interpretations of women's lives.

In Irish culture, the hero-bard image moves from oral origins to textual prominence, maintaining his status and symbolizing a voice for a nation. In Ireland,

---

<sup>2</sup> Maire Cruise O'Brien explains that etymologically, the word "file" corresponds exactly to seer, but in Ireland in recorded times the functions of poet, priest and prophet seem to have coalesced very early" (248). The bardic figure is somewhere between culture hero and high priest of a word cult.

according to Boland, "the idea of the poet was honored. It was an emblem to the whole culture that self-expression and survival could combine" (ix). By associating herself with this national poetic tradition, Boland places herself in the company of male national poets and mythological heroic bards. Yet, when she describes "the poet's vocation -- or, more precisely, the historical construction put upon it" -- as "one of the single, most problematic areas for any woman who comes to the craft" (80), she describes a theme of her memoir.

Boland asserts that the woman called to the poet's vocation works in a genre "defined by a tradition which could never foresee her," and "construed by men about men, in ways which are poignant, compelling and exclusive" (80). She questions the gendered legacy of bardic authority which is taken for granted by modern Irish male poets, whose status depends on the mythic status of ancient bards. Boland claims that her poetry destabilizes and subverts gender boundaries because she is a woman working in a traditionally male dominated craft, and simply by being a woman poet in Irish lyric tradition, she stimulates ideological changes within the poetic tradition.<sup>3</sup> Boland claims, "the women poet is now an emblematic figure in poetry" and as such, "in the projects she chooses . . . are internalized some of the central stresses . . . of poetry at this moment. And . . . the questions she needs to ask herself -- about voice and self, about revising the stance of the poet, not to mention the relation of the poem to the act of power-- are some of the questions at the heart of the contemporary form" (xv). In the process of examining these questions, Boland writes herself into a lyric national tradition, making space for her life by using these historical constructions to guide her account of her professional growth. Boland does not take issue with the historical constructions themselves. In fact, she has "an exasperated tenderness" for the "old construct of a poet's life" (xi). These direct her construction of self as bard-hero, and allow her to explore a history and tradition that do not, in Boland's opinion, speak to, or of, women's experiences, but use images of women as emblems of the

---

<sup>3</sup> In *Object Lessons* Boland embeds a previously published pamphlet, whose title perhaps describes her feelings about the exclusion of women's voices from Irish lyric traditions: "A Kind of Scar: The Woman Poet in a National Tradition."

nation, simplifying and reducing both.<sup>4</sup> In fact, the “old construct” confers authority on her memoir.

Boland regrets that “the old construct of the poet’s life . . . has lost some of the faith and trust of a society. Increasingly, it is perceived as arcane or worse: as a code of outdated power systems whose true purpose was to exalt not the poet’s capacity to suffer, but his suitability for election to a category which made him or her exempt from the shared experience of others”(xi). Boland’s memoir is an attempt to restore the poet’s reputation as “an emblem to the whole nation” that illustrates how “self-expression and survival could combine” (ix). She also writes to recast images of women in Irish lyric poetry, and performs historical retrievals, rescuing women’s voices and connecting women to nation, not as passive emblems but as active participants in nation building.

A nation develops as its discourse develops, and the bard helps shape Irish poetry. Boland appropriates the poetry of nation, which has belonged to male poets, to speak of a woman’s experiences of nation, in effect reconstructing the poet’s life so it will embrace her life. She claims *The Aeneid* as an influence on her understanding of poet, hero, and nation. Virgil’s *Aeneid* traces the relationship of Troy to Rome, shows Rome as Troy’s offspring, and lends credibility to the hero because of his Trojan roots. In effect, this poem authorizes Rome. Additionally, Virgil authorizes himself, associating himself with Homer by telling a sequel to Homer’s epic about the fall of Troy. Like Virgil who links himself to epic history, Boland links herself to bardic history. She mythologizes suburbia, tracing its relationship to nation, showing Dublin’s suburbs as offspring of Irish nation. She authorizes herself as a bard hero because she is an Irish lyric poet, a vocation historically renowned in Ireland, and because she takes poetic inspiration from

---

<sup>4</sup> Declan Kiberd asserts that the result of Boland’s renegotiation in poetry of women’s images is “an updating rather than a repudiation of the idea of the nation,” writing that she dismantles myths from within (607). Kiberd’s view contrasts with Edna Longley’s critique of Boland which he summarizes, saying she accuses Boland “of a failure to interrogate the notion of nation, with the result that the poet ends up reinstating some of the very clichés . . . she set out to question” (607).

suburbia. Her memoir authorizes suburbia as a mythic setting and women's lives as heroic, as it reshapes the discourse of nation.

Boland's memoir bridges the recorded written world of the national male poet and the unrecorded spoken world of the female objects of lyric poetry. The male poet's originating authority rests on the mythology surrounding oral artists such as bards and storytellers, and his voice speaks the female object of the Irish lyric poem into existence. Patricia Haberstroh argues that Boland's poetry attempts to "express the voices of women, to create alternative speakers to those heard most often in Irish poetry" and that these attempts can be seen in poems that recognize women's oral history such as "The Oral Tradition" (76). Because oral traditions are supported by mythological characters and settings, Boland's narrator interprets "ordinary" women as mythic characters and ordinary suburbia as a mythic setting.

To draw parallels between the world of suburbia and the world of the hero, Boland's narrator reinvents mythology, making the ordinary extraordinary and defining myths as the stories that bind a community together in the face of events that require explanation. For example, she tells a family story, declaring it a "Rachel and Leah fable about beauty and denial," one of the "real myths" (12). She describes those as "down-to-earth and hand-to-mouth yarns which start in fear and short-circuit into a pure and elaborate invention. Which bind a community together not by what they explain but by the very fact that they were forced to explain it" (13). Boland redefines suburbia as a mythical setting and claims a heroic role for herself as the bard hero who immortalizes suburbia in poetry. She says her days are "arrayed with acts so small their momentousness was visible to nobody but myself" (17). The repetitions of place in suburbia allow "deeper meanings to emerge" and reveal lives "by ritual and patterning" (170). Consequently, repetitions of dailiness become mythic because the repetitions reveal origins and explain beginnings as lives wane, thrive, change, and fade in the suburbs (166). Boland's suburban life is mythic because of its "powerful ordinariness" (168), and in this place of myth, the leading characters are women and children. The bard who immortalizes them in verse is in

turn immortalized and heroic in her own right because of the status she has achieved as poet and as a translator of orality to textuality.

Although oral tradition has had the respect of Irish culture, that oral tradition belongs to the male poets, the bards who sang of the King's triumphs in battle, or the village storyteller, renowned in his community. Boland calls the bard's power "a sweet and venerable one, with its roots deep in the flattery of princes. . . . [that gives] to Irish poets an authority long taken from or renounced by their British counterparts" (191). She claims that the bardic poet, in his "Irish manifestation, remained shuttered in an older faith: where poetry and privilege were inflexibly associated. Where . . . maleness remained a caste system within the poem" (191). She recalls: "the shadow of bardic privilege still fell on the Irish poem when I was young. It was hard to question and harder to shift. Yet I knew I would have to do both" (191). Boland's narrator penetrates the "shadow," questioning and shifting bardic privilege by redefining the poet's image and remaking oral traditions. Describing an incident that frustrates the poetry writing process, the narrator evokes suburbia's oral traditions:

I am talking to a woman in the last light. . . . We make that temporary shape that conversing neighbors often assume: not exactly settled into a discussion yet not ready to leave it either. . . . As we talk, I feel the shadow of some other meaning across our conversation, which is otherwise entirely about surface things. That it is high summer in my life, not in hers. That her life is the life mine will become, while mine is the life she has lost. (203).

Boland redefines "oral tradition" to make the term reflect new images of women generated by women because the lyric discourse she works in lacks complex imagery of women: "It is in the foreground of the poem that. . . . [it] falters. Where the women stand and talk -- deep within that image is . . . another image. The deeper image is that shadow, the aging woman, the argument that the body of one woman is a prophecy of the body of the other" (206). Because Boland cannot do justice to the woman's reality at the moment of writing the poem, she never writes it (206). She describes this linguistic miscarriage, mourning a loss but celebrating a find: "I lost the poem . . . [but] I found . . . a place of fixities and resistances where the lineaments of a tradition meet the intention of an individual poet. Something had shifted" (207).

This shift changes Boland's life as a poet and allows her narrator to claim a heroic role in her memoir.

Boland's narrator wants to free women's voices from the silence imposed upon them by roles they played in Irish poetry, which did not include women as poets. In fact, for women to write poetry, Boland explains, they had to abandon their gender: "[i]n the old situation which existed in the Dublin I first knew, it was possible to be a poet, permissible to be a woman and difficult to be both without flouting the damaged and incomplete permissions on which Irish poetry had been constructed" (xii). The narrator contends that the two lives have been "formidable historical editors" of each other (xv). When the poet's life was an emblem for the grace and power of a society, a woman's life was often the object of his expression in pastoral, sonnet and elegy; as mute object of his eloquence, her life could be at once addressed and silenced (xiv). Boland's heroic ethos impels her to explore the "inflected arguments of power and presumption which were obvious to [her] and yet unexamined in any critique [she] knew"(xi). This furthers her search, which broadens to include the search for women's voices that address their own lives, such as the voice of the Achill Woman in the chapter "Outside History." Using her memoir to fight back against society's limitations on women, Boland articulates her oppression: "As an author of poems I was an equal partner in Irish poetry. As a woman . . . I had no voice" (114). Boland says that women are mostly invisible in Ireland; she is seen primarily as a poet and not as woman, and she wants recognition for both:

When a woman writer leaves the center of a society, becomes a wife, mother and housewife, she ceases automatically to be a member of that dominant class which she belonged to when she was visible chiefly as a writer. . . . Whatever her writing abilities, henceforth she ceases to be defined by them and becomes defined instead by subsidiary female roles. ( 251)

Boland's narrator claims access to an "inner sanctum of tradition" so that she can speak back to a lyric tradition that has simplified both women's lives, and the idea of nation. She speaks back to a male dominated poetic tradition that she claims has misrepresented women as passive national symbols, negated their historical lived realities as heroes of a domestic world, and tried to exclude women from its "inner

sanctum.” The narrator’s examination and critique of Irish society’s determination to emphasize subsidiary female roles allows her to “record the interior of the poem as [she] found it; its angles of relation to [her] life and circumstance”(xiii). She acknowledges that “such angles are subjectively observed and understood”; however, she believes that her examination will provide benefits for a “working poet” because these angles are “not found in textbooks” and “they are best seen where they have the most effect: at the actual moment of writing a poem” (xiv). Boland’s narrator unravels the intertwined lives of Irish women and Irish poetry, describing the “woman poet” as “an emblematic figure in poetry” and as an emblematic figure, Boland argues, the woman poet makes gains for language and for clarity of form, which “can no longer be construed as sectional gains. They must be seen as pertaining to all poetry. That means they [women] must also be allowed access to that inner sanctum of a tradition: its past” (xv). Boland’s narrator claims access to this inner sanctum and tradition, refusing to be excluded.<sup>5</sup>

Boland claims this “inner sanctum” through her ideological initiation into lyric poetry occurring because of her avid reading of Irish nationalist poets. Recalling her return to Ireland as a teenager, Boland also recalls her attraction to the language and imagery of the lyric poets who inspired her and introduced her to images of hero and nation. Her reading, like the hero’s warrior training, prepared her for her purpose. In the chapter “In Search of A Nation,” she recalls the poets who have shaped her understanding of poetry and of the lives of poets and heroes. She meets Padraic Colum who attends a party at her parents’ house. She reads Padraic Pearse and discovers a reference to his execution for his part in the 1916 Easter Rebellion (53). An earlier patriot hero, whom Boland admires, Robert Emmet, is executed in 1803, and she refers to him as “the hero . . . of my birth” (59) and names Tom Moore the

---

<sup>5</sup> Anne Weekes points out that even though Irish women “have written, initially in Gaelic and English and latterly chiefly in English” the critics have neglected women’s writing deeming it insignificant because “[a]pproaching texts with expectations about the appropriateness of ideas and treatments, [they] validate and perpetuate traditional subjects and techniques. Unable or unwilling to recognize the value in difference, they perhaps thus ignore women’s work”(2). Lives of Irish male poets have textual testaments as memorials, all the poems they have written and biographies and autobiographies and critical articles others have written. Irish women have less choice of image available to them in poetry, where their lives have been overshadowed by poetry’s iconic images.



“exemplary Irish hero” (49). Boland recalls looking at “the shamrocks, the wolfhounds, even the crude likeness of the 1916 patriots with uncritical eyes” and using “the dialect of patriotism. *Martyr. Sacrifice. Our own*” (63). However, she becomes aware of the significance of her sex on the heroics she is enthralled with:

Only gradually . . . did the sexual drama begin to unfold. Only in fractions . . . did I begin to notice certain things: that the clairvoyance I needed to enter the theater of action and danger demanded a troubling androgyny. If I wanted to . . . speak in those conspiracies, I would have to be male. The male, after all, was an active principle, inviting admiration. . . .[H]ow could I belong to these actions, dreamed up by men and carried out by them? (64-65)

Before she becomes aware of the “disadvantage” of her gender, she longs for heroic adventures. “I would . . . write a note the night before my execution under the bluish sputter of a gas flame. I would crack my head against a pavement north of the Liffey as I fell, wounded to death by British bullets. And as soon as my head -- a male, thick-necked head -- touched the stone, I would dissolve into refrains and stanzas. I would pass from hero to apotheosis” (65). While Boland’s narrator recollects her affection for heroic sacrifice, she also recollects her growing frustration with a genre that does not include her: “I grew more and more unsettled. . . . I was starting to notice the absence of my name in it. . . .[and] that to the male principle was reserved the right not simply of action but of expression as well” (66). At sixteen and seventeen, Boland reflects, she “loved that narrative. . . . A single shot undoing a century of humiliation. Or so it seemed. The individual act of courage drew me in” (63). Relinquishing girlish beliefs, however, Boland describes her growing understanding that other lives -- “given over to language rather than action” -- are exemplary too (70). Because of the inspiration and growth inspired by the readings of her youth, Boland’s narrator fuses the heroic with language use. From her introduction to the lyric poet’s images of hero and nation, from her initiation into Irish lyric poetry through her extensive reading of it, Boland conceives the hero-bard narrator differently.

The experiential component of Boland’s initiation comes when she begins writing her own poetry. When she is a young poet, Dublin’s cafe society nourishes

her technical development. Her initiation to poetry includes initiation to the poets' circles in Dublin cafes; here novice poets discuss poetry and separate "the craft" from the place where lives are lived -- the suburbs. Boland says, "Only a few miles away was the almost invisible world that everyone knew of and no one referred to. Of suburbs and housing estates. Of children and women. . . . The so-called ordinary world, which most of us had come from and some would return to on the last bus" (x). As she matures as a poet, she realizes that her poetry must acknowledge and celebrate her gender and her suburban life. Declaring suburbia a place of margin, she also declares it a place that confers special status on her because she lives in a place, physical and mental, that gives her a unique viewpoint. Marginalization, particularly "marginality within a tradition" Boland declares, develops clarity and vision. Boland catalogues skills -- "clear eyes and a quick critical sense" (147) -- conferred by a marginal position. In the suburbs, and as a woman, Boland experiences marginalization from her profession. She comes to believe she must never obscure the role of gender in her own poetry or the role suburbia has played in her development. Lyric poetry consequently becomes a constituent of its own change, because it allows Boland's narrator to repudiate the legacy of emblematic women in the tradition she loves.

Like other heroic characters, Boland's narrator is "chosen" from an early age, and shaped by fate for her career as a hero-bard. The narrator's childhood is marked by omens that foreshadow her career as a poet. Boland's childhood is disrupted by her family's moves from Ireland to Britain to America, moves which contribute to her memory of an alienated childhood. Boland's "exile" from Ireland compares structurally to the heroic motif of the "hiding of the child."<sup>6</sup> Another omen that points to Boland's future comes when she is chastised by a school teacher for her Irish pronunciation. She describes how, when living in England, her "tongue betrayed" her when she responded to a question with a distinctly Irish sentence construction: "I had

---

<sup>6</sup> David Adams Leeming believes the "hidden place where the child [hero] is born or placed soon after birth. . . [is] a womb [symbol]" ( 39-40). The hiding of the child motif is seen in the stories of Christ, and of Zeus.

used that thing for which the English reserve visceral dislike: their language, loaded and aimed by the old enemy" (46). The authority of Standard English alienates the narrator from her environment: "I was in those places for which the English had fragrant, unfamiliar names: a copse; an orchard; a meadow. In Irish usage they would have been mere fields and gardens" (45). Realizing that her English is different from the "King's English," she tries to understand what it means to be "Irish" by reading Irish writers who write about Ireland. While Boland has an economically privileged life, her Irish language marginalizes her in England, and this language conflict is her introduction to nationalism. Boland's alienated childhood and her unique mother tongue foreshadow heroic status. She recalls a childhood spent as an outcast, and a childhood spent developing language ability, struggling to reconcile Irish English and Standard English.

Boland recalls that she became increasingly aware of her difference from other children when she returned to Ireland as a teenager. Exile had made her different: "I was not the same as other Irish children. Like a daughter in a legend, I had been somewhere else, I had eaten different foods. I had broken the spell of place and family" (58). The narrator's exile from her country is a thematic echo of the hero's meditative or physical withdrawal from the world to prepare for future endeavors.<sup>7</sup> She recalls experiencing Ireland "through the glass of exile," which magnifies the glamour of living there (62). Exiled from her country, the narrator comes to know Ireland through its poetry: "I read in starts and stops through the nineteenth century. The poems, speeches, ballads" (64). The narrator recalls finding the nation she sought in the discourse of national poets, and it is through her exploration of this discourse that she begins preparation for her role as a national poet.

As Boland's narrator describes her growth as a poet, she also articulates her intention to redraw images of women in Irish lyric poetry. She claims that for "anyone who is drawn into either of these lives [woman or poet], the pressure is there

---

<sup>7</sup> Leeming describes this aspect of heroic structures as "a spiritual rite of passage" and sees withdrawal as a positive act (97).

to betray the other: to disown or simplify, to resolve an inherent tension by making a false design from the ethical capabilities of one life or the visionary possibilities of the other" (xiv). Boland wants to avoid these pitfalls, and she implies that historical bards have not avoided this type of dualism: "In previous centuries, when the poet's life was an emblem for the grace and power of a society, a woman's life was often the object of his expression: in pastoral, sonnet, and elegy. As the mute object of his eloquence her life could be at once addressed and silenced"(xiv). She says the "majority of Irish male poets depended on women as motifs in their poetry. . . . The women . . . were often passive, decorative, raised to emblematic status" (134-135). Because Boland's narrator wants to redress the distortions of woman-as-emblem in Irish lyric poetry, she demonstrates a heroic ethos. She explains her desire to "go back to the visionary place, the obstructed moment" so that she might use each "revisiting" as "another chance to clarify the mystery of being a poet in the puzzle of time and sexuality and nationhood" (xiii). She believes her experiences as a woman poet can enlighten others, even while she admits that she does not have definitive answers and cannot "solve the puzzle" with "argument and recollection" (xiii). However, her discussion does destabilize images of both women in poetry and the bard in mythology. Boland explores intersections of the personal and the political to examine the gap or the lack of female voices explaining their lives, describing themselves, and creating their own images. She asserts that "these lives [of women, of poets] with their relation and division, make a sign which is ominous and revealing" (xii). In the past women in Irish nationalist discourse were either invisible or iconic, but not part of a lived daily reality. Boland attempts to reshape women's images as she describes a woman poet's life. In effect, she rescues the women imaginatively.

For Boland, women's transition from being the objects of Irish poems to being the authors of them raises "questions of identity, [and] issues of poetic motive and ethical direction" (126). Boland claims she is writing not about aesthetics, but about ethics and the ethical choices of poets as image makers; she writes "the more volatile the material -- and a wounded history, public or private, is always volatile -- the more

intensely ethical the choice”(127). While Boland reminds women lyric poets to be generous to their forefathers, she scolds Irish male poets for taking the “soft option” (136) when it comes to depicting the idea of a nation: “Long after it was necessary, Irish poetry had continued to trade in the exhausted fictions of the nation, had allowed those fictions to edit ideas of womanhood and modes of remembrance. . . and what was lost was what I valued” (137). And what Boland values is a woman’s story that depicted a lived reality. Boland rejects the images of womanhood prominent in Irish lyric poetry:

The heroine, as such, was utterly passive. She was Ireland or Hibernia. She was stamped . . . on silver or gold; a compromised regal figure on a throne. . . .She was invoked, addressed, remembered, loved, regretted. And, most important, died for. She was a mother or a virgin. . . .she had no speaking part. If . . . her mother tongue [was] wiped out . . . then it was for someone else to mark the reality. Her identity was an image.(66)

Boland’s memoir attempts to give a woman poet a speaking part, providing details of lived and suffered reality. She values not the “details of a past,” but the “truth these details witness -- human truths of. . . complicated human suffering” (137).

Boland recreates historical reality by re-imagining the details of the past, including the details of her grandmother’s life. She is impelled to imagine her grandmother’s life not just because her grandmother lived and died in a time of exciting political change (1909), but because Boland feels troubled not by “whether [grandmother] had included the nation in her short life, but whether the nation had included her” (69). Because Boland feels the nation has excluded her in its national discourse, she creates a place for women’s voices to right the poetic record which has done a disservice to women’s lives. She writes “I knew that the women of the Irish past were defeated. . . .What I objected to was that Irish poetry should defeat them twice” (137). Boland’s narrator, the hero bard, believes she is equipped to “rescue” the women of Ireland’s past and she begins with the inventions and fabrications about her grandmother, Mary Ann Sheils.

Mary Ann Sheils’s life illuminates her granddaughter’s, and inspires Boland’s quest to discover active images of women in Irish discourse. Boland’s narrator

speculates that not ALL the women were passive, even if lyric poetry portrayed them that way, and the aspiring young poet wonders, "If the passive images of Ireland . . . were so present in songs and remembrances, what had happened to those others? To the women who had survived. And those who had not" (67). She repeats a story her mother has told her, the reference to her mother's voice and story an example of a woman's active voice: "when I was seventeen, my mother told me a story" (67). The narrator describes the story as "a small piece of an oral tradition, told in a summer dusk and in a halting way" (67). Her mother tells young Boland about her grandmother's life and death, and Boland's recalled response to the story is "There was nothing heroic in her account" (68). However, by alluding to the oral traditions of ordinary women's lives, stories exchanged in kitchens and over backyard fences, which have not been privileged and exported by Irish society, Boland reinforces her own bardic role, because she becomes the collective voice for the segment of the society that has lacked a voice in history and in the lyric poetic tradition. According to Boland, every step "toward an origin is an advance towards silence" because the past where "our grandmothers" lived is also the place where poetry and women remain far apart (24). Boland describes the way to the past as torturous for women poets. Because she makes the journey, and a successful return, she reinforces her heroic status. By re-inventing the past, imaginatively recreating her grandmother's last journey, Boland's narrator journeys to the underworld and "harrows" the past for her grandmother's life to illuminate her own life.

The family story of an unlucky man who fathers an unlucky daughter, who dies and disappears as if she never existed, sends Boland on a quest to uncover traces of her grandmother's life. Instead, she uncovers gaps. She cannot find a grave marker for her grandmother, much less documentation of her life. Boland has only a letter written by her grandfather to her grandmother and oral stories. Neither reproduces the image of a passive woman. However, neither letter nor story show the relationship of her grandmother's life to her nation. The narrator's quest is "to see the powerful public history of my own country joined by the private lives and solitary perspectives, including my own, which the Irish poetic tradition had not yet admitted to authorship.

I wanted to see the effect of an unrecorded life . . . on the prescribed themes of public importance" (187). Because the narrator sees her own life as a reflection of her grandmother's, she must imaginatively recreate her grandmother's life, which in turn, leads her to recreate her own life in a narrative that mythologizes the woman poet's life.

The narrator, lacking poetic foremothers, yearns for the story of a woman poet who has gone before her. She lacks confidence in the life of a woman to be a visionary source of inspiration for poetry, and she lacks a narrative from someone who can show her herself in a narrative mirror:

I missed something. I wanted a story. I wanted to read or hear the narrative of someone else -- a woman and a poet --who had gone here, and been there. Who had lifted a kettle to a gas stove. Who had set her skirt out over a chair, near to the clothes dryer, to have it without creases for the morning. Who had made the life meet the work and had set it down: the difficulties and the rewards; the senses of lack. I remember thinking that it need not be perfect or important. Just there; just available. And I have remembered that. (xvi)

Boland makes that story available to guide other young poets as they begin to write. Women's silences in poetry resonate into other areas of her life, and this silence and absence spark Boland's quest for the stories that will be ethically responsible toward the reality of a woman's life. She wants the lyric tradition to recognize that experiences of nation particular to women poets can become part of its tradition.

Boland's search for a nation is inspired by the images she encounters in English books, while Irish poetry offers her an alternative way of knowing about Ireland and its history. However, both Irish poetry and English books offer images of women that contradict her own knowledge. While she lived in Britain, Boland recalls, she found a book that contained a description of Ireland, which also contradicted her own knowledge of her home:

This was the story of someone called Michael. This bog, this donkey, these distances were part of his home. But he was leaving home. . . . 'I am leaving here,' he said in the text, 'because Ireland has nothing to offer me but a spade.' . . . I turned the page again. . . .there was woman sitting on a throne, holding a harp. She wore loose clothes, draped in folds, and one shoulder was bare. 'Hibernia,' it said under the picture. And the line 'O harp of my country.' . . .I was confused and startled. Was this the place I had

heard of? Was this what it offered? This strange mix of music and a wooden-handled implement I had hardly ever seen? . . . No one I knew used one. (48)

Boland is offered two images of Ireland to choose from: the one readily available to her in Irish lyric poetry, or the one provided by the discourse of England; both offer a very limited role to women.

Boland's quest to discover nation and woman's relationship to nation, begins as a desire to find her own life represented in a story of a woman poet. This quest evolves from simply looking for a narrative in which she sees herself reflected, to undertaking a historical retrieval/rescue of women's lives. When Boland recalls being a young woman poet and wanting the story of "a woman and a poet -- who had gone here and been there" (xvi), she yearns to see herself in another woman's narrative. The yearning for a narrative that chronicles a woman poet's life impels her to create what she needs. The narrator points out the resemblance of the woman poet's life and the historic images of women in Irish lyric poetry: both lives have been unspoken and unnamed by women. As Boland's narrator forges a recollection of her own life, meditating on the women's lives which have made her life as a poet possible, she begins a retrieval process that lets her tell the story of a woman poet, the story she never had. By imagining her grandmother's life and death, she attempts to sift history for details of her grandmother's life. She recalls her grandmother's final trip to the National Maternity Hospital, saying "whatever she saw that morning, it is lost" (4). However, she fabricates details, and claims fabrication is "the way we make the past" (5). When she searches the Termonfeckin graveyard for evidence of her grandmother's past, she can find no trace of the woman: "no memorial because she had no name" (23). For Boland, her inability to find a marker for her grandmother's grave becomes a reflection of her inability to find a narrative marker for the woman poet's life.

Boland recalls reading the poetry of Yeats and Keats, and looking for her name and "it was not there" (25). In "Lava Cameo," she says, "I began this piece to make a record of a woman lost in circumstance" (32). The narrator asserts that "an



emblem can be a name,” that images are “nomenclature” (32), and recalls an emblem that seems to represent her grandmother’s life: a lava cameo. Boland comes to believe the lava cameo is an “emblem of something desperate” (34) and the artist “ironic and self-conscious” because she or he inscribed “a profile in the cold rock. . . . cut a human face into what had once flowed, fiery and devouring, past farms and villages and livestock. . . .ma[d]e a statement of something which was already a statement of random and unsparing destruction” (33). Boland fears that her recollection of her grandmother, like the lava cameo, might result in “sarcastic craftsmanship” (34). However, if the lava cameo is a “witticism in the face of terror, if it made an ornament of it,” then all memory must be accused of the same crime, according to Boland (34). Boland claims that she had no choice but to fulfill her “need to make a construct of that past” (34). Boland’s quest impels her growth to mature poet and begins her on a journey of self-discovery and professional growth.

By the time Boland’s heroic journey begins, she has the theoretical and technical background to support her career as a word and image maker, but she still has not recognized the impact of her gender on the genre she chooses. The narrator’s journey from Dublin’s cafe district to the suburbs spans physical distance and closes emotional and intellectual distance too. The narrator recalls that as a young poet she knew that:

Only a few miles away was the almost invisible world that everyone knew of and no one referred to. Of suburbs and housing estates. Of children and women. . . .The so-called ordinary world, which most of us had come from and some would return to on the last bus, was not even mentioned. . . .I absorbed the sense that poetry was safe here in this city. . . . Beyond it was the ordinariness which could only dissipate it; beyond it was a life for which no visionary claim could be made. (x)

Boland recalls her understanding of suburban life was underpinned by a belief that “visionary claims” could be made for the lives of poets and that the poet was a magician who manipulated the natural world: “Poetry as magic. Every young poet, struggling to find words, sooner or later touches that old and superstitious idea. Every apprentice . . . has a sense . . . that to name the lightning is to own it” (102).

Boland acknowledges that times have changed since she was a young poet and that now "[a] woman's life -- its sexuality, its ritual, its history -- has become a brilliantly lit motif, influencing the agenda of culture and commerce alike" (x). However, Boland claims that the lives of poets and women "remain divided" (xii). The lyric tradition does not have a history of conventions associated with suburban life, and Boland's life as a wife and mother is amputated from her life as a poet. This realization wounds Boland, and like the hero's wounding, it strengthens the narrator in her resolve. According to Boland, the Irish poetic tradition does not acknowledge a "woman's life." However, Boland turns disadvantage to advantage, observing that she found her "poetic voice by shouting across [the] distance" that separated a woman's life and a poet's life (xi). Boland declares that "as a young woman and an uncertain poet, I wanted there to be no contradiction between the way I made an assonance to fit a line and the way I lifted up a child at night" (xi). Boland's memoir is an attempt to heal the division between a "poet's life" and a "woman's life".

Boland's move to the suburbs is like the hero's descent to underworld, and Boland too, visits the "land of the dead." In her quest to understand the reality of her grandmother's life, she not only visits a grave yard, but she also drives to Clonmel, a garrison town where her "great-great-grandfather took up a position on this headquarters staff as a sergeant major" (161). Here she visits the Clonmel poor house where her forefather took the only secure position available to a Catholic: master of the workhouse (162). The narrator recalls that her "account of . . . place begins with a journey. If this were a poem, that journey would become a descent" (158). By imagining an "every woman's" life in the poorhouse, Boland's narrator is inspired to "doubt the pastoral renewals of day-to-day life" (171), believing that "[i]n thinking about her at all, I was exercising . . . a dangerous freedom. It is a freedom inherent in the shifting outlines of a defeated history. Such a history is full of silences. Hers is only one of them. And those silences . . . are the quicksand on which any stable or expressive view of place will forever after be built" (172).

The underworld that Boland visits is history, which for Boland is represented by the Clonmel poorhouse. Ironically, the name Clonmel means "meadow of honey"

(160), but Boland calls it “my underworld” (174). The Clonmel poorhouse is where Boland fully realizes how history and its images of women have silenced them. Boland’s narrator claims that she writes her memoir because the “past, those images, her [the poorhouse occupant’s] compromised life came to find me in the midst of my incomparably easier one” (174). From a position of power, she asserts solidarity with powerlessness, and declares a right and responsibility to rescue these images from their place of silence. Boland’s narrator asserts, when a woman poet stakes a claim in “old territory,” “the subject cannot forget her previous existence as object,” so “the poem she writes is likely to have a new dimension” (233). Boland’s narrator describes her own heroics when she describes writing, saying, “It can be an act of rescue rather than a strategy of possession. And the object she returns to rescue, with her newly made Orphic power and intelligence, would be herself: a fixed presence in the underworld of the traditional poem” (233).

Boland’s poetic journey brings her to the realization that suburbia can become the territory of poetry. Although her life as a wife and mother is very distant from the constructions of a poet’s life that the young narrator held, she begins to realize that the ordinary world of suburbia nurtures poetry: “I was certain the suburb nurtured my poetry. . . . Everywhere you looked there were reminders . . . that lives . . . thrived, waned, changed, began and ended here” (166). Boland remembers that when she realized that the lyric tradition demanded a heroic sacrifice from her, she began to understand her “ethical duty” as a poet. Rather than making the sacrifice demanded, she refuses and her refusal helps her redefine “heroics.” The lyric tradition seems to demand that she must sacrifice her gender to continue to write, or that she must give up the life of a poet in order to be a mother.<sup>8</sup> Boland does not view the situation as an either/or one though, and she integrates gender and authorship.

---

<sup>8</sup>Boland’s gender/poet angst is recorded in another story, that of Liadan and Cuirthar. Lorna Reynolds analyses a version of the story of Liadan and Cuirthar in “Irish Women in Legend, Literature and Life” (16). The woman poet, Liadan, chooses between being a poet, or being the wife/mother of a poet and she opts out of domesticity -- this story emphasizes that motherhood, and possibly therefore womanhood, separates females from poetry.

The hero's successful ascent from the underworld reflects hope, rebirth, and renewal. In Boland's memoir, the narrator's ascent makes her a guide for other women poets, and remakes the Irish lyric tradition. Boland ascends from the underworld where she has, like Aeneas, viewed the dead, first through the lens of Irish lyric poetry and then through the lens of her own imaginative reconstructions. While Aeneas is guided by the Cumaean sibyl, Boland's narrator is guided by her own sibyl.<sup>9</sup> Her memories of her grandmother come from family story alone, and the search to recover her grandmother's life means she has to recreate it, imaginatively, in her memoir. Boland's ascent from the underworld is signalled by realization that her life in suburbia has mythic overtones. In her memoir, Boland's narrator both emulates and subverts the hero-bard as she relocates the image from Irish mythology to suburbia. Boland's heroic conquest is the writing of *Object Lessons*, a book which signals an ascent or rebirth, similar to the hero's ascent/rebirth after the journey to the underworld. Boland's journey to the underworld allows her to resurrect iconic images, working with them to subvert them. To remake the image of the woman-as-object in Irish lyric poetry, she destabilizes and unsettles images of bard, hero, and poet. Thus, Boland's memoir tells the story of a woman's heroic journey into a territory dominated by males.

---

<sup>9</sup> Boland has played with the idea of guides to the underworld in her poetry. For example, in "The Journey," from *An Origin Like Water*, Sappho is the speaker's guide to the underworld.

## **Chapter Five**

### **Conclusion**

Maria Campbell, Maxine Hong Kingston, and Eavan Boland each take on heroic tasks and roles in their autobiographies. Seeking to reclaim the hero's role from Western patriarchal discourse by enhancing and expanding the role to reflect her mother culture, each woman uses her autobiography as a site of and a weapon of revenge to speak back to an oppressive dominant discourse. For these women, their heroes and their notions of heroic conventions differ from the standard heroic type found in the discourses of their mainstream communities. Consequently, these women nourish a new breed of hero and new deeds of the heroic.

The heroic ethos each author works with is born from an oral tradition which is a legacy from her mother culture. Each of the women adapts and adopts from her mother culture and from mainstream culture to create her narrators. Using heroics learned from the oral traditions of foremothers, and English literary conventions from the dominant culture such as autobiography, they write selves who speak back to the mainstream communities that have described them. The women use their mother culture's oral techniques of story telling as a form of resistance to the colonizing forces of their mainstream communities. However, the artistic productions of both the mainstream cultures and the mother cultures they inhabit are implicated in their narrative constructions as well. The women carve places for themselves in the mainstreams' discourses with the production of their autobiographies, and in the autobiographies, they reproduce the oral traditions learned from their foremothers. The oral narratives that each woman draws from are rich in mythological characters, and provide the framework upon which to structure the narrator of each text. Each of

the women uses writing to empower herself and to provide evidence of and evidence for the oral traditions of her mother culture.

All three women write to speak back to racist and sexist mainstream discourses that have attempted to limit women, but they also respond to sexism in their home communities. Campbell writes back to a mainstream society that stereotypes “half-breeds,” and to a Métis culture that believes in female passivity. Kingston talks back to a mainstream society that labels her as “gook” and “chink,” and a home culture that says it is “better to raise geese than girls.” Boland writes back to a mainstream society that has worshipped women’s images in lyric poetry, and by its worship, denied women the opportunity to become the authors of lyric poetry. She also writes back to a feminist community that does not recognize the debt it owes to its forefathers in lyric poetry. These women fight back, declaring war on the discourses that will not allow them the freedom and opportunity to be complex humans whose identities are shifting and provisional.

The women claim selves that participate in, and contribute to, the diverse communities they inhabit. They resist the colonizing forces of their mainstream cultures, using oral traditions. By using these oral traditions, the women rebuild their pasts and elevate the status of their home cultures. These women show that what mainstream has perceived as lack, is really an abundance. For example, the women’s home communities thought to be “artless” are in reality, “artful.” In fact, the abundance from the home culture gives each woman the authority to write the self as heroic. They blend the heroic familiar to western discourse with the heroic learned from their mother cultures to create new heroic ideals and conventions.

Each of the authors writes the narrator as a hero, showing how her life has been distinct, and how her path as a word warrior has been laid out for her and “foretold” through childhood omens. Maria Campbell, Maxine Hong Kingston, and Eavan Boland offer lives that are distinct from the mainstream. Maria grows up in a “Road Allowance” community of “half-breed” people, who are not accepted by either the mainstream or the Indigenous community. Maxine Hong Kingston grows up in a Chinese-American community whose culture and traditions separate it from the

mainstream, even as the community partakes in mainstream. Eavan Boland is an Irish woman and a lyric poet in a national tradition, two roles which she claims have been downright contradictory. As an Irish woman, her experiences of childbirth, childrearing, and suburban life are reflected not in lyric poetry, but in the oral discourse of her neighbors and family. Boland explores the relationship between historic images of women and the images' effect on contemporary women. She attempts to ground the images in history, while drawing new word images reflective of the contemporary world.

The women use orality to show their home cultures' roles as historical subjects, and to demonstrate how these cultures have contributed to the contemporary world. Campbell's Saskatchewan "half-breeds" are implicated in the settling of the province. Maxine Kingston's family contributes to America in the same manner as any of its Euro-descended citizens do, but her family is not allowed to partake equally because of racist stereotypes. Boland's grandmother sacrifices her life to bearing children, but her reality is not reflected historically, in fact women are reduced to iconic images in lyric poetry; however, Boland rescues this image from history and makes her own life a parallel for her grandmother's life. She shows historic women's realities as more complex than that of woman as nation/ nation as woman. Her memoir is a restorative history of women in Irish lyric poetry. All three women show their communities as participants in the dominant community.

The mother culture has been marginalized through the discourse of the mainstream, so the women's autobiographies offer counter images, written to oppose, correct, expand, confront the ones in the dominant cultures. The women explode the stereotypes of the mainstream by writing themselves as heroes. Each narrator has a unique language which foreshadows her story-telling abilities. Campbell's language is unique even from members in her own community and this brings into question the mainstream's definitions of language categories. Kingston's mother-tongue likewise is unique, and aside from her own community, she has never met anyone who speaks the language she speaks, not the Chinese in Hawaii or San Francisco. Boland's mother tongue is neither Standard English, nor Irish, and even her Irish-English is

distanced from place because she has spent her childhood in exile from the place and place names she was born to. Furthermore, the poetic language of her profession does not have a vocabulary with which she can reveal her "hidden woman's life." All three women designate their narrators as "chosen" because of a special attachment to language.

Each woman moves from disadvantage to advantage, from margin to center, bringing her mother culture with her, showing gendered identity as contingent, rather than as a stable category. The women authors' heroics are in their destabilization of categories, and their rejection of sacrifice in favor of middle ground. They show their individual artistic talent, but they also show it is fostered by the communities they are linked with. Their home communities practice their own traditions of art, heroics, aesthetics. The women invoke oral narratives from domestic settings, thereby asserting the dignity of the oral arts of their mothers. The women tell histories that would not be told by the dominant cultures they inhabit, and include genealogy to show connection with family, and the history of genealogy as an oral genre.

Their stories are told in episodic, anecdotal and digressive manners which evoke the cyclic quality of oral stories. The women's memoirs can be understood in single episodes: both Kingston and Boland have published memoir chapters previously to gathering them into memoir shape. The women combine the oral with the textual for a multiplicity of effects -- they report or witness the crimes of the dominant cultures, they take revenge by using the language used to oppress them to tell about the true complexity, fullness and abundance of their lives and marginalized cultures, and they use oral and textual in combination to underscore the tensions between themselves and their communities.

The women restore the historical consequence of their communities, using mythology and oral traditions to show that their communities have their own stories, heroes and heroics. Campbell draws on figures known in oral stories of the "halfbreeds," and the Trickster figure of Nêhiyawak mythology. Maxine Hong Kingston alludes to mythology in her chapter titles, which also show the sequence of the narrators growth and refer to the characters of Fa Mu Lan and Ts'ai Yen, a



warrior and a poet, respectively. Boland draws on the mythology which supports the bardic image and the history of the "poet" to create a woman poet, a hero bard steeped in the mythology of the past, but illuminated by Boland's contemporary life. Thus, the autobiographies are individual acts of resistance, and bids to make a new reality for themselves as women authors in traditions that have not wanted "their kind."

## Works Cited

- Acoose, Janice. "Personal Conversation." Saskatchewan Indian Federated College, September 1999.
- . "Post Half-Breed: Indigenous Writers as Authors of Their Own Realities." *Looking at the Words of Our People: First Nations Analysis of Literature*. Ed. Jeannette Armstrong. Penticton: Theytus, 1993. 27-44.
- . "Half-Breed: A Revisiting of Maria Campbell's Text from an Indigenous Perspective." Jeannette Armstrong. 137-150.
- Ahenakew, Edward. "Cree Trickster Tales." *Journal of American Folklore* 42 (1929): 309 - 353.
- Allen, Paula Gunn. ed. "Introduction." *Spider Woman's Granddaughters: Traditional Tales and Contemporary Writing by Native American Women*. New York: Ballantine, 1989. 1-25
- , ed. *Studies in American Indian Literature: Critical Essays and Course Designs*. New York: MLA, 1983.
- Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin. *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures*. London: Routledge, 1989.
- Blaeser, Kimberly M. *Gerald Vizenor: Writing in the Oral Tradition*. Norman: U of Oklahoma P, 1996.
- . "Trickster: A Compendium." *Buried Roots and Indestructible Seeds: The Survival of American Indian Life in Story, History, and Spirit*. Eds. Mark Lindquist and Martin Zanger. Wisconsin: U of Wisconsin P, 1994.

- Boehmer, Elleke. *Colonial and Post Colonial Literature*. New York: Oxford UP, 1995.
- Boland, Evan. "The Journey." *An Origin Like Water: Collected Poems 1967 - 1987*. New York: Norton, 1996. 182-185.
- . *Object Lessons: The Life of the Woman and the Poet in Our Time*. New York: Norton, 1995.
- . "Oral Tradition." *Outside History: Selected Poems 1980 - 1990*. New York: Norton, 1990. 75-77.
- Brown, Jennifer S.H., and Robert Brightman, eds. 'The Orders of the Dreamed': *George Nelson on Cree and Northern Ojibwa Religion and Myth, 1823*. Winnipeg: U of Manitoba P, 1988.
- Bruchac, Joseph. *Lasting Echoes: An Oral History of Native American People*. New York: Avon, 1997.
- Campbell, Maria. *Half-Breed*. Halifax: Goodread Biographies, 1983.
- . "Lecture: Native Literature 211." U of Saskatchewan, September 1998.
- . "Personal Conversation." U of Saskatchewan, June 1998.
- . Trans. *Stories of the Road Allowance People*. Penticton: Theytus, 1995.
- DeLoria, Vine. "Foreword." *Look to the Mountain: An Ecology of Indigenous Education*. Ed. Gregory Cajete. Durango: Kivaki, 1994. 11-14.
- Egan, Susanna. *Patterns of Experience in Autobiography*. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1984.
- Ellis, Peter Berresford. *A Dictionary of Irish Mythology*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1991.

- Erdoes, Richard and Alfonso Ortiz, eds. *American Indian Myths and Legends*. New York: Pantheon, 1984.
- . *American Indian Trickster Tales*. New York: Penguin, 1998.
- Gill, Sam and Irene F. Sullivan, eds. *Dictionary of Native American Mythology*. New York: Oxford UP, 1992.
- Gilmore, Leigh. *Autobiographics: A Feminist Theory of Women's Self-Representation*. London: Cornell UP, 1994.
- Grant, Agnes, ed. *Our Bit Of Truth: An Anthology of Canadian Native Literature*. Winnipeg: Pemmican, 1990.
- Gregory, Augusta. *Lady Gregory's Complete Irish Mythology*. London: Slaney, 1994.
- Haberstroh, Patricia Boyle. *Women Creating Women: Contemporary Irish Women Poets*. Syracuse: Syracuse UP, 1996.
- Highway, Tomson. *The Rez Sisters*. Saskatoon, Fifth House, 1988.
- . "Foreword." *The Dispossessed: Life and Death in Native Canada*. Geoffrey York. Toronto: Little, Brown and Company, 1990. vii-ix.
- Hulme, Peter. *Colonial Encounters: Europe and the Native Caribbean, 1492-1797*. London: Methuen, 1986.
- Hutchinson, John. *The Dynamics of Cultural Nationalism: The Gaelic Revival and the Creation of the Irish Nation State*. London: Allen & Unwin, 1987.
- Hymes, Dell H. "Coyote, the Thinking (Wo)man's Trickster." *Monsters, Tricksters, and Sacred Cows: Animal Tales and American Identities*. Ed. A. James Arnold. Charlottesville: U of Virginia P, 1996. 108-137.

- Kiberd, Declan. *Inventing Ireland: The Literature of the Modern Nation*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1995.
- King, Bruce. "New Literatures in English." *Encyclopedia of Literature and Criticism*. Eds. Martin Coyle et al. London: Routledge, 1991. 1113-1124.
- Kingston, Maxine Hong. *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts*. New York: Vintage, 1989.
- . "Cultural Misreadings by American Reviewers." *Asian and Western Writers in Dialogue: New Cultural Identities*. Ed. Guy Amirthanayagam. London: MacMillan, 1982. 55-65.
- . "Maxine Hong Kingston: From An Interview Between Kingston and Arturo Islas, Professor of English, Stanford U, October 1, 1980." *Women Writers of The West Coast: Speaking of Their Lives and Careers*. Ed. Marilyn Yalom. Santa Barbara: Capra, 1983. 11-19.
- Lau, Joseph S. "Kingston as Exorcist." *Modern Chinese Woman Writers: Critical Appraisals*. Ed. Michael S. Duke. New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1989. 44-52.
- Leeming, David Adams. *Mythology: The Voyage of the Hero*. New York: Oxford UP, 1998.
- Liu, Wu-Chi and Irving Yucheng Lo, eds. *Sunflower Splendor: Three Thousand Years of Chinese Poetry*. New York: Anchor /Doubleday, 1975. 77-80
- Llywelyn, Morgan. *Bard: The Odyssey of the Irish*. New York: Tor, 1987.
- Lord, Albert B. "Oral Poetry." *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*. Eds. Alex Preminger and T.V.F. Brogan. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1993. 863-866.

- Lutz, Hartmut. *Contemporary Challenges: Conversations with Canadian Native Authors*. Saskatoon: Fifth House, 1991.
- Ma, Y.W., and Joseph S. Lau, eds. *Traditional Chinese Stories: Themes and Variations*. New York: Columbia UP, 1978.
- MacKillop, James. *Dictionary of Celtic Mythology*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1998.
- Mahony, Christina Hunt. *Contemporary Irish Literature: Transforming Tradition*. New York: St. Martin's P, 1998.
- Miller, Lucien and Hui-Chuan Chang. "Fiction and Autobiography." *Modern Chinese Women Writers: Critical Appraisals*. Ed. Michael S. Duke. New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1989. 25-43
- Medoff, Jeslyn. "Maxine Hong Kingston." *Modern American Women Writers*. Consulting Ed. Elaine Showalter. Eds. Lea Baechler and A. Walton Litz. Toronto: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1991. 251-259
- Neihardt, John G. *Black Elk Speaks: Being the Life Story of A Holy Man of the Oglala Sioux as told through John G. Neihardt (Flaming Rainbow)*. 1932. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1979.
- Newman, J.K. "Epic." *Princeton Encyclopedia Of Poetry and Poetics*. Eds. Alex Preminger and T.V.F. Brogan. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1993. 371-375.
- O'Brien, Maire Cruise. "The Role of The Poet in Gaelic Society." *The Celtic Consciousness*. Ed. Robert O'Driscoll. New York: George Braziller, 1981. 243-254.
- Ong, Walter. *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*. London:

- Methuen, 1982.
- Ostriker, Alicia. *Stealing the Language: The Emergence of Women's Poetry in America*. Boston: Beacon, 1986.
- Petrone, Penny. *Native Literature in Canada: From the Oral Tradition to the Present*. Toronto: Oxford UP, 1990.
- Radin, Paul. *The Trickster: A Study in American Indian Mythology*. New York: Greenwood, 1956.
- Ramsey, Jarold. "Ti-Jean and the Seven-Headed Dragon: Instances of Native American Assimilation of European Folklore." *The Native in Literature*. Eds. Thomas King, Cheryl Calver, and Helen Hoy. Oakville: ECW Press, 1987. 206-224.
- Revard, Stella P. "Epic." *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*. Eds. Alex Preminger and T.V.F. Brogan. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1993. 361-371.
- Reynolds, Lorna. "Irish Women in Legend, Literature and Life." *Women in Irish Legend, Life and Literature*. Ed. S.F. Gallagher. Buckinghamshire, UK.: Colin Smythe, 1983.
- Slemon, Stephen and Helen Tiffin, eds. *After Europe: Critical Theory and Post Colonial Writing*. Sydney: Dangaroo Press, 1989.
- Han, Suyin. *A Mortal Flower*. London: Jonathon Cape, 1966.
- . *Destination Chungking: An Autobiography by Han Suyin*. London: Jonathan Cape, 1943.
- Todd, Loreto. *The Language of Irish Literature*. Houndmills: MacMillan Education,

1989.

Tu Smith, Bonnie. "Literary Tricksterism: Maxine Hong Kingston's The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts." *Anxious Power:*

*Reading, Writing, and Ambivalence in Narrative by Women*. Eds. Carol J.

Singley and Susan Elizabeth Sweeney. New York: SUNY Press,

1993. 279-294.

Vizenor, Gerald. *Manifest Manners: Postindian Warriors of Survivance*. Hanover, N.H: Wesleyan UP, 1994.

Wang, Yi-T'ung, trans. "Ts'ai Yen (c.A.D. 200)." *Sunflower Splendor: Three Thousand Years of Chinese Poetry*. Eds. Wu-chi Liu and Irving Yucheng Lo. New York: Anchor/Doubleday, 1975. 36-39 and 537-538.

Weekes, Ann Owens. *Irish Women Writers: An Uncharted Tradition*. Lexington: UP of Kentucky, 1990.

Werner, E.T.C. *Myth and Legends of China*. New York: Arno Press, 1976.

Wills, Clair. *Improprieties: Politics and Sexuality in Northern Irish Poetry*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993.

Wolfart, H.C. and Freda Ahenakew, eds. *The Cree Language is Our Identity: The La Ronge Lectures of Sarah Whitecalf*. Winnipeg: U of Manitoba P, 1993.

Yen, Ping-Chiu. *Chinese Demon Tales: Meanings and Parallels in Oral Tradition*. New York: Garland, 1990.